



The Iconography of Contemporary Tibetan Art: Deconstruction, Reconstruction and Iconoclasm

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Abstract

My thesis examines the contemporary Tibetan art movement that has emerged not only in the Tibetan homeland but also amongst the Tibetan diaspora. As the movement spans temporal and spatial boundaries, national and geographical borders, it is appropriate to examine the movement in the context of globalisation.

I argue that these contemporary Tibetan artists are re-claiming their identity: an identity which has been usurped, not only by the Chinese occupation of their homeland which resulted in suppression of Tibetan culture within Tibet and displacement of culture in case of the diaspora, but also by the pervasive Orientalist view of Tibet as an exotic Shangri-La, a remote and imaginary utopia. This identity emerges in a post-modern global era as one that draws on a sense of place and culture to reflect on issues that transcend the local and have a universal relevance. I examine the different ways in which the artists, in both their homeland and in exile, negotiate their modern Tibetan identity, and how this is expressed in their art.

Works of contemporary Tibetan art often involve the deconstruction and reconfiguration of Tibetan Buddhist iconography. They challenge art audiences to confront the stereotypes and assumptions of Tibetan culture. In this thesis I argue that while these artworks may appear iconoclastic, the artists do not reject tradition or denigrate religious images, but rather, reinterpret Buddhist iconography in a way that is relevant to current day issues in contemporary life. By redeploying Buddhist iconography in a contemporary context, these artists renew Tibetan art and Tibetan Buddhist culture, thereby helping to keep this endangered culture vital and dynamic.

My thesis is largely based on extensive interviews with artists both in Tibet and the diaspora. In addition, the key authors and publications that have informed my work are: Clare Harris, anthropologist and curator at Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford, particularly her two books: *In the Image of Tibet: Tibetan Painting after 1959* (1991) and *The Museum on the Roof of the World* (2012); Giuseppe Tucci; David Jackson; Per Kvaerne; Donald Lopez; Janet Gyatso, as well as contemporary Tibetan scholars, such as Tsering Shakya. I also draw on the work of post-colonial thinkers, such as Edward Said, and contemporary art theorists such as Nicolas Bourriaud, particularly his publication

Altermodern: Tate Triennial, 2009.

Little serious scholarship has been undertaken into this relatively new art movement. Tibet's unique socio-political situation, with its homeland now in China, a government-in-exile in India and widespread diaspora in the West, poses important questions with regard to identity in a globalised world that no longer conforms to the centre-periphery paradigm but rather accedes to a system of multi-directional cultural flows. The concept of a transnational art movement, which is nevertheless identifiable by its cultural foundation, is an important area of inquiry in terms of what it can say about the evolution of society and culture in a globalised world. It also has implications for the Eurocentric stranglehold over art history, notions of hybridity and Western cultural stereotypes of "the other". By focusing on the contemporary art of the Tibetan community, my intention is to contribute to the post-Orientalist discussion of culture and unravel a complex iconography for a global audience.

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Thank you to Maria Mawo at Rubin Museum in New York, and Xiaohan and Rupa at Rossi and Rossi in London; Santosh Gupta at Lotus Gallery in Kathmandu; Eiko Honda, Gonkar Gyatso's assistant, for arranging our first meeting in Sydney; artist Zhuoquan Liu who I met at Gonkar's show in Brisbane, and Damian Smith in Melbourne.

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Introduction

This thesis examines the contemporary Tibetan art movement that emerged at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century. The aim of this research project is to situate the movement within the broader phenomenon of hybrid art culture in a globalised world; exploring how contemporary Tibetan art reflects the identity of modern Tibetan culture and society beyond the cultural stereotypes, in both the Tibetan homeland and amongst the Tibetan diaspora.

Tibetan society and culture went through enormous upheavals in the twentieth century as a result of the expansionist policy of the new Chinese Communist regime that forcibly occupied Tibet in 1950. This resulted, on one hand, in an indigenous population who now found itself living in the People's Republic of China and being subjected to the violent forces of the Communist Revolution and its form of modernisation. On the other hand, the events spawned a Tibetan diaspora, first in India and other Himalayan States, which then spread to the West and underwent another kind of modernisation.

The contemporary Tibetan art movement spans Tibetan artists still in their homeland, and diaspora artists in India and the West. These two strands have so much in common that together they form the phenomenon of contemporary Tibetan art movement. Yet the artists from each side bring their own different complexions, which manifest in their art. Indeed, to look at only the contemporary artists in Tibet or the contemporary artists of the diaspora is to only see half the story of the art movement. The artists know each other, they often exhibit together, draw inspiration from each other, and many studied together in Chinese universities at the end of the Cultural Revolution. A number of the artists then became teachers to the younger members of the movement. Some remained in Tibet, some went into exile while some were born outside Tibet to parents

who had already sought refuge in Nepal or India. Together, their different trajectories add contextual and visual complexity to the oeuvre of the art movement.

Naturally, because of the profound social, political and geographical changes undergone by Tibetan society, their culture has entered into modernity with even more heterogeneous complexity than before. Yet the pervasive outside view, which I interrogate in this thesis, is the romantic conception of a peaceful and exotic culture steeped in religious mysticism that originated in an idyllic Shangri-La.¹ Even some of the preeminent Tibetan Buddhist scholars in the West still encourage this perspective. For example, in the catalogue to the vast *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet* exhibition, Robert Thurman wrote: “[t]hrough Tibet’s seventeen-hundred-year association with the Buddha reality, the entire land of Tibet has become the closest place on earth to an actual Pure Land.”² The reality of Tibet’s history is far more complicated and multifarious than this statement suggests and it is against this backdrop that the contemporary Tibetan artists remonstrate against the myth and cultural stereotype.

Given the upheaval wrought upon Tibetan society and culture in the twentieth century, I examine how the changed cultural contexts within which Tibetan artists now operate impact upon the iconographic, mythological and stylistic features of Tibetan art. Further, I ask how the contemporary Tibetan artists treat and use the iconographic material of the religious art traditions of Tibet in order to interpret modern culture and current issues.

Background

The existence of the contemporary Tibetan art movement is still relatively unknown in the West. Indeed, even the traditional art of Tibet was very little known in

¹ Keila Diehl, *Echoes from Dharamsala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 11.

² Marilyn M. Rhie and Robert A.F. Thurman. *Wisdom and Compassion, The Sacred Art of Tibet* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 312.

the West until around 1960 because of Tibet's political and geographical isolation. There existed only a small number of private and museum collections that had been gathered by the few Westerners who had visited Tibet on official missions or as travellers and scholars.³ Then over the next couple of decades, art dealers and collectors in London, Paris, New York and elsewhere began to acquire Tibetan art; exhibitions were staged and fine catalogues were produced.⁴

The proliferation of traditional Tibetan art and cultural objects in the West was a consequence of an exodus of Tibetans who followed the Dalai Lama, the temporal and spiritual leader of Tibet, into exile in India in 1959.⁵ A great flood of Tibetan art became available in the wake of the first wave of the Tibetan diaspora, as fleeing Tibetans sold artworks and objects in order to support themselves. Added to this were an enormous number of works that had been looted by the Chinese and sold through dealers in places such as Hong Kong.⁶ As collections grew, impressive exhibitions of traditional Tibetan art were held in Europe and North America.⁷

In the meantime, the forces of the Chinese Communist Regime descended into the violent chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) all over China. In Tibet, religious practices were banned, religious buildings were demolished and religious objects, texts and artworks were destroyed or stolen, resulting in the decimation of a culture.⁸

³ David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson. *A Cultural History of Tibet* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2003), 277.

⁴ Ibid, and see also Pratapaditya Pal. *Art of the Himalayas* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1991), 7–8.

⁵ In the next two years, around 80,000 Tibetans fled Tibet (Melvyn C. Goldstein. *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1951*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 825).

⁶ Donald S. Lopez Jr. *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 137, and see David Germano, “Re-membering the Dismembered Body of Tibet.” In *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*. Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew T. Kapstein (eds.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 53–94), 53; John F. Avedon. *In Exile from the Land of Snows*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). (It was in Hong Kong that I first came across Tibetan art in these very antique shops).

⁷ For example: *Dieux et demons de l'Himalaya – Tibet, Kunst des Buddhismus* in Paris and Munich (1977–78); *Heritage of Tibet* in London (1981–82); *Die Götter des Himalaya* in Germany (1989–90); *Art esotérique de l'Himalaya* in Paris (1990–91); *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet* in San Francisco, New York and London (1991–92); and *Tesori del Tibet, oggetti d'arte dai monasteri di Lhasa* in Milan (1994). Snellgrove and Richardson. *A Cultural History of Tibet*, 15.

⁸ Germano, “Re-membering the Dismembered Body of Tibet,” 53.

Outside Tibet, particularly in Dharamsala in Northern India where the Dalai Lama set up a Tibetan government-in-exile, priority was given to the consolidation and preservation of traditional Tibetan culture. The Dalai Lama set up a number of religious, cultural and educational institutes to preserve Tibetan traditions.⁹ These Institutes have continued to develop, such as the Norbulingka Institute named after the Dalai Lama's summer residence in Lhasa which finally opened in 1995. The Institute's purpose was to provide training and employment for Tibetans in the traditional arts such as *thangka* painting (religious scroll painting on cloth) and appliqué *thangka* (*thangkas* made from embroidered silk rather than paint), sculpture and wood carving.¹⁰



Figure 1. Appliqué *thangka* with traditional brocade border, *Śākyamuni Buddha*, unknown artist, from the Norbulingka exhibition, Sacred Arts of Tibet, Henry Jones Art Hotel, Hobart 2009, 55 x 80 cm (approx.) (photo by author).

Nearly twenty years later, Norbulingka is centred around a museum of traditional Tibetan arts, where visitors can observe the artists and craftsmen at work. The official website states that “Norbulingka has come to represent a viable cross-section of the Tibetan community at large, where the traditional and modern interact and Tibetan culture and values retain their vibrant potential.” And further “[i]t reconciles the

⁹ Men-Tsee-Khang, The Official Website of the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute. www.men-tsee-khang.org/Istatus/establish.htm.

¹⁰ Norbulingka Institute. Preserving Tibetan Culture. www.norbulingka.org.

traditional creatively and respectfully with the modern, and seeks to create an international awareness of Tibetan values and their expression in art and literature.”¹¹ However, while the whole complex attempts to combine the traditional with the modern, the artworks created here are first and foremost religious art (even though they may be sometimes bought by tourists for merely aesthetic purposes). To this extent they are not part of the contemporary Tibetan art movement.

Though many of the artists who now live and work in the West spent time in Dharamsala and studied traditional *thangka* painting there, their art has modified extensively the conventions associated with this tradition and no longer serves religious purposes. Rather it provides a socio-political reflection on contemporary Tibetan and global issues.

Emergence of Contemporary Tibetan Art

The initial emergence of a contemporary Tibetan art came after a prolonged disruption in the Tibetan artistic tradition due to the establishment of the Communist regime in China and its annexation of Tibet. Not only was a great deal of art and visual culture destroyed in Tibet, but the new Chinese Government prescribed a new form of art which expressed the ideology of the new regime and reflected the values of communism.¹² Socialist Realism, adapted from their communist neighbour of the USSR became official cultural policy in Tibet, as it did all over China, particularly during the turbulent years of the ‘Great Leap Forward’ (1950s) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Mao Tse-Tung (1893–1976) iterated his views on art on many occasions. He emphasised that all art and literature was for the masses, especially the workers, peasants and soldiers. The main purpose was:

¹¹ Norbulingka Institute: Preserving Tibetan Culture. www.norbulingka.org.

¹² *Mao Tse-Tung on Literature and Art* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1977), 10.

to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy with one heart and one mind.¹³

Under this system, art work that was deemed to be bourgeois or anti-socialist was condemned.¹⁴ Artists were required to make art that served the people according to Communist Party policy, which resulted in monumental sculpture on the Soviet model, portraits of Chairman Mao as part of his cult of personality, as well as pictures of the heroes of the revolution – soldiers, factory workers and peasants.¹⁵ Tibetan arts, particularly religious *thangka* painting, were banned in Tibet after 1959 as part of the social and economic reforms which aimed to eliminate the religious dominance of Tibetan society.¹⁶ As we will see, the leaders of the contemporary Tibetan art movement grew up in Lhasa during the period of the Cultural Revolution and felt its effects in a number of ways.

After the death of Chairman Mao, which spelt the end of the Cultural Revolution, an ideological shift took place, which facilitated the emergence of the Chinese contemporary art phenomenon and then the beginnings of the contemporary Tibetan art movement. Deng Xiaoping's 'Open Door' policy in 1978 brought greater freedom of movement in China, and many Tibetans were able to travel back and forth to India.¹⁷ This meant that many Tibetans who had not gone into exile could gain access to Tibetan culture and religion, that had been denied them under Mao, in the Tibetan enclaves in India.

¹³ Mao Tse-Tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* [The little red book] (Peking: Foreign Languages Press 1967), 301.

¹⁴ Michael Sullivan, "Art in China since 1949," *The China Quarterly*, no. 159 (September 1999), 712–722.

¹⁵ Nudes, abstraction and expressionism were classified as "harmful", while landscape, by which one could show love of country, was classified as "not harmful". (Sullivan, "Art in China since 1949," 713–714).

¹⁶ Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of the Snows, A History of Modern Tibet since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 254.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 375.

In addition, the ‘open door’ economic policy allowed a number of foreign art exhibitions to come to China, giving artists an opportunity to glimpse the artistic developments being made in the West.¹⁸ The most talked about foreign exhibition among Tibetan artists was Robert Rauschenberg’s touring exhibition, *Rauschenberg’s Overseas Cultural Interchange*, which came first to Beijing in 1985 and then to Lhasa where it was displayed at the Revolutionary Exhibit Hall.¹⁹

Another factor in the development of contemporary Chinese and then Tibetan art was the repudiation of the Cultural Revolution by the Communist Party in 1981. As Xu Hong observes: “[t]his created an environment in which artists and writers could react to the constraints imposed on their activity during a decade of despotic rule.”²⁰ The repudiation effectively meant that the symbolism and iconography of the Cultural Revolution could be commandeered for new artistic purposes. These tropes can be found in the work of many contemporary Tibetan artists, particularly those working in Lhasa.

Modern Chinese art developed in a number of directions during the early 1980s, culminating in what became known as the ’85 movement, ‘New Wave’,²¹ or avant-garde. Focused at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Beijing, this movement swept the nation,²² and ultimately had an influence on contemporary Tibetan art. The driving force behind this movement was the art school graduates, who had benefited from the re-opening of universities and art schools under Deng’s ‘open door’ policy.²³ Exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art began to be held in the late 1970s. According to Fei Dawei,

¹⁸ Xu Hong. “Modern Chinese Art,” in *Tradition and Change, Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, Caroline Turner (ed) (St. Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 2005, 330–359), 332–333.

¹⁹ Conversations with artists in Lhasa, 2010, eg. Tsering Nyandak and Benchung. (And see Rauschenberg Foundation: rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/archive/photo3000)

²⁰ Xu. “Modern Chinese Art,” 332–333.

²¹ The artists I spoke to in Lhasa used these terms interchangeably but generally referred to the movement as the ‘New Wave’.

²² Huang Zhuan. “Reflections on the ’80s Avant-Garde,” *ArtZine, A Chinese Contemporary Art Portal*, 2008. artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid245_en.html.

²³ Fei Dawei. “Once upon a cloud: our 1980s art school lives.” In *Leap, The International Art Magazine of Contemporary China* (April 2011 – The Education Issue, 89–93), 91.

who was among the first post-cultural revolution intake of students at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the movement did not gain impetus until a critical mass of art graduates assembled, “before uniting to launch a rebellion in the art world ...”²⁴

Among this new group of art students in Beijing and other universities around China were a number of Tibetans, including Gonkar Gyatso, Nortse, Ang Sang and Tsewang Tashi. Apart from Tsewang Tashi, who stayed on in Beijing for a while after university, these artists returned to Lhasa with new ideas derived from their exposure to Western art practice and theory and the ground swell of the new Chinese art scene. In Lhasa, the artists began to work and develop their own art practices and organised a series of exhibitions under the name of The Sweet Tea House, beginning in 1985.²⁵ This was the beginning of the contemporary Tibetan art movement.



Figure 2. Artists at “The Third Painting Exhibition of the Tea Houses’ School,” Lhasa, 1987. Gonkar Gyatso is fourth from the left in between Ang Sang (left) and Nortse (right). (Photo courtesy of Nortse)

The boon of the early 1980s, however, proved to be short-lived in terms of cultural and individual freedoms in China, and political events once again overtook artistic endeavours. Martial law was declared in Tibet in March 1989 after anti-Chinese

²⁴ Fei. “Once upon a cloud: our 1980s art school lives,” 93.

²⁵ Conversations with artists in Lhasa, 2010, particularly Nortse, Ang Sang and Nyandak.

demonstrations in Lhasa.²⁶ In June, a wave of protests swept across China with the opposition coming mainly from the very university students who had benefited from earlier reforms, culminating in the confrontation in Tiananmen Square in Beijing.²⁷

Meanwhile, the Sweet Tea House School of artists in Lhasa ceased to function as the artists pursued other activities.²⁸ Gonkar Gyatso, who was one of the main forces behind the early contemporary Tibetan art movement, went into exile in the early 1990s, first to India and then to London.²⁹ The movement was, however, continued in Lhasa by a core group, including Tsewang Tashi, Nortse and Ang Sang, who paved the way for the next generation of artists.

In 2004 the group of artists in Lhasa founded the Gedun Chöphel Artists' Guild, named for the revered and controversial Tibetan scholar of the early twentieth century. While the association comprises an eclectic mix of artists from the old generation and the new, Tibetan, Chinese and Tibetan Muslim,³⁰ it is a contemporary Tibetan creative endeavour. Their manifesto acknowledges the common roots of the artists and the influence of the Cultural Revolution in their lives.³¹

After the first sporadic exhibitions of contemporary Tibetan art took place in Lhasa in the late 1980s, a number of exhibitions were held in the early 1990s in Dharamsala by artists who had gone into exile, such as Gonkar Gyatso and Karma

²⁶ Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of the Snows, A History of Modern Tibet since 1947*, 430.

²⁷ Ibid, 431.

²⁸ Conversations with artists, Lhasa 2010, esp. Nortse, Ang Sang and Nyandak.

²⁹ The beginnings of the movement in Lhasa and Gyatso's career up to the end of the 20th century are related in Clare Harris' *In the Image of Tibet, Tibetan Painting after 1959* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999).

³⁰ Tibetan Muslims (Tib. *Bod-ka-che*) form a small minority in Tibet, not officially recognized by China. Muslims entered Tibet as early as the eighth century from Kashmir and by the seventeenth century there were Muslims in Tibet who originated from Kashmir, Ladakh, Nepal, and other parts of China. They intermarried with Tibetans and adopted Tibetan ways of life but retained their religion. This group is separate from more recent Muslim immigrants to Tibet. They also form a Tibetan minority in exile. See Ataullah Siddiqui. "Muslims of Tibet," *Tibet Journal* (Vol. XVI, No. 4, Winter 1999, 71–85); Chen Bo. "A Multicultural Interpretation of an Ethnic Muslim Minority: The Case of the Hui Tibetan in Lhasa," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* (Vol. 23, No. 1, April 2003, 41–61); Conversation with Tibetan Muslim artist, Somani, in Lhasa 2010.

³¹ The Gedun Chöphel Artists' Guild manifesto is set out at Appendix A.

Phuntsok. By the first years of the twenty-first century, the movement had gained sufficient momentum to warrant exhibitions at prestigious galleries in the West.

These exhibitions comprised works by artists from both Lhasa and the diaspora. For example: *Contemporary Tibet Painting*, Peaceful Wind Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico (2004); *Visions from Tibet: A Brief Survey of Contemporary Painting*, Rossi & Rossi Gallery, London (2005); *Waves on the Turquoise Lake: Contemporary Expression of Tibetan Art*, University of Colorado Art Museum (2006); *Lhasa Train*, Peaceful Wind Gallery, Santa Fe (2006); *Faces of Tibet, Contemporary Tibetan Art from Lhasa*, Siebengebirgs Museum, Koenigswinter, Germany (2006); *Consciousness and Form—Contemporary Tibetan Art*, Rossi & Rossi, London (2007); *Tibetan Encounters—Contemporary Meets Tradition*, Rossi & Rossi, London (2007); *Tibet Art Now—On the Threshold of a New Future*, Amsterdam (2009); *Tibetan Visions—Contemporary Painting from Tibet*, Rome, Italy (2009); *Tradition Transformed—Tibetan Artists Respond*, Rubin Museum, N.Y. (2010); *Beyond The Mandala—Contemporary Art from Tibet*, Rossi & Rossi and VOLTE, Mumbai (2011); *In-Between*, Rossi & Rossi, London (2013); *Parallel Realities—Contemporary Tibetan Art*, Rossi & Rossi and ARNDT, Berlin (2014–2015).

Occasionally exhibitions of contemporary Tibetan art were held in China during this period, for example, *Lhasa – New Art from Tibet* (2007) and *Return to Lhasa* (2008) at the Red Gate Gallery in Beijing. Despite the titles of these exhibitions, Gonkar Gyatso, who was then living in London, represented the diaspora in both exhibitions. Then in 2010 the largest exhibition so far of contemporary Tibetan art was held at Sonzhuang art colony on the outskirts of Beijing. The *Scorching Sun of Tibet* exhibition comprised hundreds of artworks from fifty artists from Lhasa and the Tibetan diaspora. The first decade of the twenty-first century also saw the increase in solo exhibitions by Tibetan artists in the West and Asia and the inclusion of contemporary Tibetan artists in major

cultural events such as Venice Biennale (2009), the Sydney Biennale (2010 and 2012), and the Asia Pacific Triennial (2009).

We can discern that there are fundamentally two types of galleries or museums that curate exhibitions of contemporary Tibetan art. The Rubin Museum in New York and Rossi & Rossi Gallery in London, for example, have backgrounds in traditional or classical Himalayan or Asian art, and have, therefore, expertise in traditional Himalayan and Buddhist iconography. These galleries and museums have branched out into contemporary art as the new art movements proliferate. The other type of gallery or museum, such as the Museum of Modern Art in Brisbane (host of the Asia Pacific Triennial), has an ongoing association with modern Asian art and contemporary art theory, but not necessarily an equivalent expertise in classical Asian or Buddhist iconography.

I argue that while much of the artwork produced by the contemporary Tibetan art movement utilises Buddhist iconography and concepts, these ideas and motifs are properly seen as cultural references rather than simply religious symbols. Like other newly emerged contemporary art movements, the Tibetan artists draw from their heritage and infuse it with their recent history and contemporary situation.³² These young art movements form a narrative of the temporal trajectory of each culture. They express their unique circumstances and individual roads to modernity as well as their own place in the geopolitical age. Nicholas Bourriaud speaks of a new modernism resulting from a global dialogue which is beyond nationalism, and which he calls ‘altermodernism’.³³

The transnational artists of the contemporary Tibetan art movement embody this new direction in art, in which they are not confined by the labels of ‘Tibetan artists’ or ‘Tibetan art’ but contribute to the diversity of global contemporary art. In their re-

³² For example, speaking of the Cuban art movement that started in the 1980s, Antonio Eligio, observes that the artistic movement developed as a consequence of Cuban cultural policy since the late seventies. (Antonio Eligio. “A Tree from Many Shores,” *Art Journal* (Vol. 57, No. 4, Winter, 1988, 62–73), 63).

³³ Nicholas Bourriaud, “Altermodern.” *Altermodern–Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 12.

working of traditional Tibetan Buddhist iconography they challenge art audiences to confront the stereotypes and assumptions of Tibetan culture and force the viewer to accept contemporary art and artists on their own terms in a globalised world.

Literature Review

To date very little serious academic study has been made of the contemporary Tibetan art movement in contrast with the development of contemporary Chinese art which has been receiving serious scholarly in Asian Studies departments of Universities in the West, led by Chinese academics such as Xu Hong, Wu Hung and Shao Dazhen just to mention a few.³⁴ Even though most of the founding members of the contemporary Tibetan art movement were educated to a greater or lesser extent in Chinese art schools and universities, the contemporary Tibetan art movement remains a separate phenomenon from the modern Chinese art movement, with distinct styles, techniques, subject matter and sources of inspiration and therefore deserves study in its own right.

The first serious study of Tibetan visual culture since Chinese occupation is by Clare Harris, anthropologist and curator at the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford. In her book *In the Image of Tibet, Tibetan Painting after 1959* (1999), Harris addresses the fate of Tibetan civilization and culture since Tibet was subsumed into China in the mid-twentieth century. She proposes that while Tibet no longer exists as a nation state or political entity, Tibetan culture survives both inside the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and outside amongst the Tibetan diaspora.

Her main argument is that Tibet exists as an idea in the imagination, and that idea is contested by a number of parties.³⁵ Harris divides the field into four perspectives: the

³⁴ Articles by Xu Hong of the National Art Museum of China and Shao Dazhen, professor of art history at CAFA, Beijing, have been published by ANU School of Pacific and Asian Studies and University of Sydney East Asian Studies, respectively. Wu Hung, professor of Chinese Art History at the University of Chicago has published books on contemporary Chinese art.

³⁵ Harris. *In the Image of Tibet: Tibetan Painting after 1959*, 9.

image of Tibet in the West, the image of Tibet in exile, the Chinese image of Tibet and the Tibetan image inside the TAR.

In the first case, Harris asserts that the West takes an Orientalist view of Tibet as a remote, exotic and idyllic Shangri-La that is suspended in time and accordingly subjects the visual culture to a “museumizing process.”³⁶ To enforce her point, Harris refers to exhibitions in the West of traditional Tibetan art, such as the *Wisdom and Compassion* exhibition (referred to above), and exhibitions that have included traditional Tibetan art, such as *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) in Paris.³⁷ With regard to the Chinese view of Tibet, Harris examines images from China that portray Tibetan civilization as backward and in need of liberation. Added to this is a second slightly later Chinese image of Tibet, in the romantic primitivist mode that resembles the Western image of an exotic idyll.³⁸

The image of Tibet in exile follows two lines: firstly, the official, conservative image which promotes a traditional ‘authentic’ culture; and secondly, a counter-narrative in which artists explore the potential of modernity.³⁹ The final image is the indigenous view from within the Tibetan Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China. This perspective follows the evolution of visual culture in the TAR, from the official propaganda image, through the Cultural Revolution and Deng’s ‘Open Door’ period to the beginnings of the contemporary Tibetan art movement. Harris examines the emergence of a modernist sensibility among artists in Tibet and contrasts their situation with Tibetans living in exile, that is, the conservative Tibetan community in India.

³⁶ Harris. *In the Image of Tibet*, 12.

³⁷ Other commentators have also pronounced that exhibitions of traditional Tibetan culture in the West continue to promote an Orientalist fantasy of a Shangri-La mythology. For example, Erberto Lo Bue, “Review Article,” *Tibet Journal* (Vol. XXXVI, nos 3 & 4, 2001), 207; Heather Stoddard, in her analysis of the *Wisdom and Compassion* exhibition, states: “The ‘myth of Tibet’ and its art is thriving and well.” “The Development in Perceptions of Tibetan Art: From Golden Idols to Ultimate Reality,” in *Imagining Tibet: perceptions, projections, and fantasies*, Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther (eds) (Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications 2001, 223–253), 228; and see David Jackson, “Apropos a Recent Tibetan Art Catalogue,” in *Vienna Journal of South Asian Studies* (Vol. 37, 1993, 109–130).

³⁸ Harris. *In the Image of Tibet*, 120 & 122.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

Harris explores the notion of ‘authenticity’ with regard to culture in a rapidly changing world as the disparate Tibetan communities re-invent, in different ways, the traditions of Tibet. She presents ‘authenticity’, which “is considered essential for self-determination” as a mutable concept.⁴⁰ It is subjective and relational, dependent upon external forces. She proposes that both Tibetans in the TAR and those in exile have constructed their own versions of ‘cultural authenticity’ in response to the same historical circumstance. However, Harris further argues that twentieth-century Tibetan ‘art’ and contemporary art forms have been largely ignored by the West, because they fail to fulfil Orientalist expectations of Tibet.⁴¹ Finally, she suggests that this Orientalist fixing could possibly be counteracted by acknowledging that an homogenous Tibet does not exist, and did not exist even prior to Chinese occupation.

Harris’ work was the first major publication to deal with contemporary Tibetan art and the contemporary Tibetan art movement, which at the date of publication was still in its infancy. Harris also introduced us to Gonkar Gyatso, who has become very probably the most important contemporary Tibetan artists today.

Since the publication of her book in 1999, the contemporary Tibetan art movement has experienced a period of growth and maturity. At the time of writing, the Tibetan community in exile to which Harris referred was confined to the conservative faction in India. However, there are now a large number of Tibetan contemporary artists working both in Lhasa and in exile. Both these sets of artists explore their cultural identity. As Harris pointed out, the artificial reconstructions of Tibet place a conservative pressure on the younger generation, and contributes to the prolonging of an identity crisis suffered by Tibetan artists.⁴²

⁴⁰ Harris. *In the Image of Tibet*, 69 & 198.

⁴¹ Ibid., 199.

⁴² Ibid., 72.

Harris returns to the concept of invention of culture in a chapter of her next major publication on the subject: *The Museum on the Roof of the World – Art, Politics and the Representation of Tibet* (2012). The main argument of the book is that the behaviour of collectors and curators, both Western and Chinese, fed by the exotic and mystical notions of the culture, has resulted in the conversion of Tibet into a virtual museum; a process which started long before the Chinese occupation. In the chapter entitled “The Invention of Tibetan contemporary Art,” Harris discusses the activities of contemporary Tibetan artists who are working to counteract and challenge the outsiders’ utopian perceptions of their homeland. Harris’ brief treatment demands more thorough analysis of the artworks through which the artists challenge the stereotypes. In this thesis, I examine the ways in which the Tibetan contemporary artists from both Lhasa and the diaspora explore their Tibetan identity and draw upon their own perceptions of Tibetan culture.

In another chapter entitled “The Buddha Goes Global” (which was originally published as an essay in *Art History* in 2006), Harris retells Gonkar Gyatso’s story and extends the discussion to his more recent work and the concept of the transnational artist. Harris’ chapter/essay provokes possibilities for further investigation of the phenomena of the current global consumerist cult of the Buddha, something which a number of the artists from both Lhasa and the Tibetan diaspora explore in their work. Accordingly, I have been able to give due attention to this trend in my research.

The next major scholarly examination of contemporary Tibetan art is by Nathalie Bousquet-Gyatso, *Entre devenir de préservation et désir d’innovation, la peinture tibétaine en quête de sa propre modernité (fin années 1980 jusqu’à 2005)*⁴³ (2007). Bousquet-Gyatso travelled to Tibet and other places in the course of the research for her doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne in Paris, department of the History of Art. She takes a

⁴³ *Between the duty to preserve tradition and the desire for innovation, Tibetan painting in search of its own identity [sic] (end of the 80s to 2005).*

chronological and survey approach in the examination of Tibetan painting from the late 1980s to 2005, and includes practising artists who work solely in a traditional style as well as the innovative contemporary artists.

Bousquet-Gyatso sought to determine if one single attitude or aesthetic could represent the face of present day Tibet. She concludes that the two streams are united by their use of the narrative image and the figure of the Buddha. In doing so, however, she glosses over the significant difference in purpose of each stream. While traditional Tibetan artists are making art primarily for religious purposes, the contemporary artists are re-interpreting the iconography of Buddhism for secular purposes, applying it to current day social and political issues. As such, the cosmopolitan and transnational artists of the contemporary art movement, both in Lhasa and in the diaspora, have more in common with their international artist brothers and sisters than with the conservative branch of Tibetan art, both in their exploration of technique and medium, as well as in their role as artists. Across the flourishing contemporary art movements of Asia, artists have drawn from cultural traditions as well as incorporating iconography which depicts singular politico-socio-historical trajectories and ask profound questions regarding cultures swept along by overwhelming global forces.

Bousquet-Gyatso has also touched on the concept of '*métissage*' (ethnic or cultural mingling), in the sense of the artist responding to different cultural influences, in her monograph on the artist Gonkar Gyatso. In *Gonkar Gyatso, La peinture tibétain en quête de sa propre modernité* (2005), the author follows the artist's journey from Tibet, through India and finally to the West, and covers some of the same material as her doctoral thesis. This monograph is particularly useful for the reproduction and discussion of Gyatso's early works from the 1980s and 1990s, and expands on Clare Harris' earlier examination of his work.

Whereas Harris and Bousquet-Gyatso looked mainly at the medium of painting, my research encompasses work in other mediums, such as photography, video installation, sculpture, installation and electronic media, much of which has only emerged this century.

A more recent study of contemporary Tibetan art is a doctoral thesis by Leigh Miller, entitled: *Contemporary Tibetan Art and Cultural Sustainability in Lhasa, Tibet* (2014). Miller proposes that forces such as colonialism, globalisation and racism threaten the survival of Tibet's indigenous culture, and that innovative artistic production can act to mitigate these forces. She concludes that Tibetan contemporary artists are pioneering practices of cultural sustainability.

In her thesis, Miller gives thorough narrative treatment to the chronology of artistic developments in Tibet in the twentieth century to the emergence of the contemporary Tibetan art movement. However, she does not address the Tibetan artists in the diaspora or the important connection between the Chinese contemporary art movement and the art movement in Lhasa. While Miller's study focused on the Lhasa group of artists and the question of sustainability of an indigenous culture, my research looks at the art movement in a broader context, including artists from the diaspora, examining how they respond to globalised perceptions.

As my study examines the iconography used by contemporary Tibetan artists, particularly the translation of a religious symbolism into a modern cultural language, I have looked to the significant scholarship of traditional Tibetan art for a greater understanding of the artistic heritage of Tibet from which the artists so obviously draw.

The first studies of Tibetan art by Western scholars occurred in the early twentieth century. In particular, the Italian scholar, Professor Giuseppe Tucci, has made a significant contribution to the study of Tibetan art, culture, history and Buddhist

philosophy based on his extensive expeditions to Tibet in the first half of the twentieth century. Tucci was the first to place the history of Tibetan art within its political and cultural context on the basis of a systematic analysis of historical and religious sources.⁴⁴ Tucci's vast scholarship includes: *Indo-Tibetica* (7 volumes) 1932-1941; *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* (3 volumes) 1949; *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, 1949 and *The Religions of Tibet*, 1970, just to name a very few. George Roerich's *Tibetan Paintings* (1925) formed the first account of exclusively Tibetan painting styles by a Western scholar.

Other important scholars whose work has informed my analysis include: the Indian scholar Pratapaditya Pal (*Tibetan Paintings*, 1984; *Art of the Himalayas*, 1991); Gega Lama, Tibetan painting master living in India (*Principles of Tibetan Art*, 1983); David Jackson (*A History of Tibetan Painting*, 1996; *Tibetan thangka painting*, 1984); Valrae Reynolds (*From the Sacred Realm, Treasures of Tibetan art from the Newark Museum*, 1999);⁴⁵ Amy Heller (*Tibetan Art*, 1999); British Tibetologist, David Snellgrove, *In the Image of the Buddha*, 1978, *Cultural History of Tibet* (with Hugh Richardson) 1968; and Donald Lopez Jr. (*Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 1998).⁴⁶

Since the publication of Professor Lopez' *Prisoners of Shangri-La* in 1998, there has been a recognition in certain circles of the need to re-evaluate the narrow view of Tibetan culture and history, as Kabir Heimsath notes, but that need has not translated to the mainstream, being confined to a small group of scholars and researchers. Heimsath observed that the "outdated mystical view of Tibet" is particularly entrenched when it

⁴⁴ Erberto Lo Bue. "Giuseppe Tucci and Historical Studies on Tibetan Art." In *The Tibet Journal* (Vol. XXXII, no. 1, Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Spring 2007, 53–64), 53–54.

⁴⁵ The collection at the Newark Museum in New Jersey is the earliest American collection of Tibetan art (David L. Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson. *A Cultural History of Tibet* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2003), 277.

⁴⁶ Other classical Tibetan scholars who have contributed to the literature on contemporary Tibetan art in catalogue and journal essays include: Ian Alsop ("Contemporary Painting from Tibet" in *Visions from Tibet*, 2005) and Donald Dinwiddie ("Gonkar Gyatso – Contours of Identity" in *Art Asia Pacific*, 2009).

comes to their art, and the authenticity of culture is questioned according to the conservative view, which holds that ‘tradition’ is genuine while innovation is not.⁴⁷ The works of art discussed in this thesis represent the artists’ profound endeavours to address this issue and express their contemporary identity. These artists demonstrate that cultural richness is not necessarily lost by newness and modernisation. Both the artists in Lhasa and those in the diaspora confront the question of what is Tibetan today. Their different circumstances mean they often approach the question from opposite positions.

Methodology

My research is based to a large extent on interviews and conversations with Tibetan artists both in Tibet and in the diaspora, as well as email correspondence with artists. In Lhasa, I met a great many artists. While most of the artists spoke some English, a few of the artists had a very good command of English, in particular, Tsering Nyandak (Nyandak) and Benpa Chungdak (Benchung). Either one or other of these artists was with me constantly to act as translator when needed, and it was advantageous to have translators who were also artists and familiar with the other artists and their work.

On my first field trip to Lhasa I was also fortunate to be able to collaborate with the artists Gade and Nyandak on an English translation of an essay from the *Scorching Sun of Tibet* exhibition in Beijing, which I attended before journeying overland to Tibet. These several days spent working with Gade and Nyandak were particularly fruitful in enabling me to gain a good grasp of the ideas and opinions of these two artists on the subject of contemporary Tibetan art. We discussed at length every idea expressed in the essay to ensure the best translation possible.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Kabir Mansingh Heimsath. “Untitled Identities, Contemporary Art in Lhasa, Tibet.” *Asian Art*. 16 December 2005. www.asianart.com/articles/heimsath/index.html.

⁴⁸ I also have some Chinese language from my years in Hong Kong and China in the 1990s. However, I usually refrained from using it, even though all the artists speak Chinese, because I judged it impolite to use the language of the coloniser, so to speak. The only time I drew upon it was in my collaboration with

The artists in Lhasa seemed very willing to talk candidly and openly about the issues facing their society, culture and country at the present time. Nevertheless, any study touching on Tibet is encumbered with the pervasive political subtext of the China-Tibet situation. Many contemporary Tibetan artists have insisted that their work should not be seen as primarily political art.⁴⁹ However, it is impossible to escape the politics. On my second field trip to Tibet in 2011, an exhibition of contemporary Tibetan art in the centre of Lhasa was closed down ostensibly for the safety of the artists. And some years earlier, after riots in Lhasa in March 2008, the artist Nyandak, was questioned by authorities regarding one of his art works, *Middle Path* (2008). The authorities accepted Nyandak's explanation of the painting and he was not detained.⁵⁰ During my time in Lhasa, I felt no restriction on my movements within the city of Lhasa, and I met with and moved about freely with the artists in public and in their homes and studios. However, I am under no illusion that the artists were fully aware of what was permissible and what was not, and I simply followed their lead.

In addition to talking to artists, I attended galleries and exhibitions of contemporary Tibetan art, both in Australia and abroad. A number of the artists, such as Gonkar Gyatso and Kesang Lamdark, have their own websites, as do galleries such as the Rubin Museum of Art and Rossi & Rossi Gallery. Furthermore, exhibitions now utilise the internet as another means to attract and interact with their audience. For example, the *Tradition Transformed* exhibition of contemporary Tibetan art at the Rubin Museum (2010) incorporated an electronic channel of communication with the artists. A webpage entitled "What do you see?" allowed an audience, which may or may not have seen the

Gade and Nyandak, because Gade's father is Chinese (his mother is Tibetan) and the translation was from the Chinese language.

⁴⁹ For example, Gonkar Gyatso, *Three Realms*, panel discussion (Brisbane: Griffith University Art Gallery, 24 February 2012. <http://omc.uq.edu.au/audio/artmuseum/GonkarGyatso-ThreeRealms-podcast.mp3>), and Tsering Nyandak, in conversation with Kabir Mansingh Heimsath, *The Lightness of Being*, exhibition catalogue (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2008), 7.

⁵⁰ Conversation with artist, Lhasa, October 2010.

exhibition in situ, to leave messages regarding their impression of the art works and to which the artists could then respond. Elsewhere on the website, each artist had their own “Artists Blog” page, where they talked about their own art works.⁵¹

These then, are the primary ways in which I conducted my research. My research revealed that a deeper understanding of the work of contemporary Tibetan artists would be gained by an in depth knowledge of their unique rich culture, history and religious beliefs. Accordingly, my second field trip to Tibet in 2011 involved more travel into the countryside to view the landscape that forged a culture. I was thus able to experience Tibet under snow and see first hand the magnificent classical art of the Gyantse monasteries two hundred and sixty kilometres south of Lhasa.⁵²

I also had an extended stay at the Central University for Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, India, in 2012. While there I was able to study many liturgical works of the Buddhist canons, translated from Tibetan, Sanskrit, Pali and Chinese. Some of the great early Buddhist art, from which the iconography of Tibetan religious art is ultimately derived, is located in this area and I was able to visit these works and monuments in situ. My own research has been augmented by the scholarly work of established Tibetologists, in terms of the historical, political, ethnographic, sociological and philosophical (Buddhist) aspects of Tibetan society, and in recent years more scholarly works are available in English by Tibetan authors.

My analysis has been informed by the iconological approach espoused by Erwin Panofsky, that is, the interpretation of the symbolic meanings of the iconography in the artistic works. Panofsky’s method for analysis of a work of art, or body of works, is a

⁵¹ Rubin Museum of Art, New York. <http://traditions.rma2.org>.

⁵² The art work in these monasteries have been studied extensively, see for example, Giuseppe Tucci, *Gyantse and its Monasteries* (Indo-Tibetica Vol. IV), (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, [1941] 1989); Erberto Lo Bue & Franco Rica, *The Great Stupa of Gyantse* (London: Serindia Publications, 1993).

threefold one that, nevertheless, merges into one organic and indivisible process.⁵³ The first level deals only with the identification of motifs or primary subject matter of a work. However, even this first level, that Panofsky calls “pre-iconographical description” (53), calls for a knowledge, either through practical experience or supplemented by other sources, of the motifs or objects depicted.

Secondly, under iconographical analysis, motifs and combinations of motifs in composition are connected with themes and concepts by which secondary meaning in representations of narrative and allegory are identified (53). Iconographical analysis presupposes a familiarity with specific themes or concepts via literary sources, an understanding of the historical conditions, and an insight into the artists’ own influences (61-63). The third level of interpretation, which he terms the ‘iconological’, is applied to ascertain the “underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, period, class, religious or philosophical persuasion” which are construed by the artist and translated into an art work (55).

The work is understood, then, as a document of the artist’s personality or the worldview of the society at a particular time. Panofsky emphasises that the iconological interpretation requires something more than a familiarity with specific themes or concepts but a diagnostic attitude – a ‘synthetic intuition’ (64). Because the intuitive approach is inevitably subjective and conditioned by one’s own ‘worldview’ (*Weltanschauung*), a familiarity with and insight into the culture and traditions is imperative. Thus, the intrinsic meaning of the art should correspond to the intrinsic meaning of other documents of the relevant time and place that also bear witness “to the political, poetical, religious, philosophical, and social tendencies of the personality, period or country under investigation” (64-66).

⁵³ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), 67.

Interpretation is informed by knowledge and experience of the artist's world. In other words, analysis of the images is conducted for evidence of the philosophical, social, political, poetical, religious and cultural content that reflects the worldview of the artists whose works are the subject of the investigation. By this approach the works of art become cultural documents of their time. The iconography of contemporary Tibetan art is complex and the artists operate within a global context, therefore the analysis must be informed by knowledge of both the past and present, inside and outside Tibet.

My analysis is also informed by postcolonial theory, particularly that of Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978) and Homi Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*, 1994).

'Orientalism' is the term Said employs to describe the Western approach to the Orient.⁵⁴ Edward Said's Orientalist theory concerns the tendency to dichotomise the human condition into an 'us and them' polarity, resulting in an essentialist or stereotyped view of the 'other' and in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power: political, intellectual, cultural and moral.⁵⁵ As James Clifford remarks: "The key theoretical issue raised by *Orientalism* concerns the status of all forms of thought and representation for dealing with the alien."⁵⁶

Tibetan scholar, Tsering Shakya, suggests that so far Tibet has remained outside the postcolonial discussion because of an assumption that Tibet is immune from Orientalist discourse, partly because it was not annexed by a Western power. Yet, as he points out, Tibetan studies have been very much shaped by Orientalist assumptions which have gone unrecognised.⁵⁷ Likewise, in his review of researchers on Tibet, Per Kvaerne begins by stating: "Since the publication in 1978 of Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (...),

⁵⁴ Edward W. Said, "Orientalism." In *The Edward Said Reader*, edited by Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, 67–113 (London: Granta Books, 2001), 93.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁶ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture, Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 261.

⁵⁷ Tsering Shakya. "Who Are the Prisoners?" In *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Vol. 69, no. 1, March 2001: 183-189) 183.

it is no longer possible for us in the West to attempt to understand the ‘Orient’ (...) without realizing that such an endeavour is beset by innumerable prejudices, habits of thought, and instinctive attitudes.”⁵⁸

It is clearly important to consider the question of Orientalism in the analysis of contemporary Tibetan art, as I am an Occidental ‘outsider’. As Said himself remarks: “Orientalism is ... a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world.”⁵⁹ Panofsky emphasises the importance of correcting one’s own subjective interpretation with evidence and insight into the traditions historically related to the works under analysis.⁶⁰

With this in mind I endeavour to peel back the Tibetan myths and stereotypes to reveal the ontological and epistemological complexities which inform the work of the contemporary Tibetan artists. In the case of Tibet, the East-West dichotomy is not the only mode in play; the annexation of Tibet by China and stereotyped representations of Tibetan culture in Chinese art mean that Orientalist theory has new application within the Orient itself. The dichotomy is, therefore, determined along the lines of economic and political power as well as intellectual and moral power. The contemporary Tibetan artists actively use their work to challenge both the stereotypes drawn by the Chinese and the Western constructs of an idealised Tibet.

I employ the hybridity and identity theories of Homi Bhabha, which speak to contemporary complexities and the emergence of new cultural forms as a result of colonial and post-colonial contact and cultural cross-fertilisation. Bhabha states:

⁵⁸ Per Kvaerne. “Tibet Images Among Researchers in Tibet,” In *Imagining Tibet: perceptions, projections, and fantasies* by Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rather (eds) (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001, 47–63), 47. Interestingly, Kvaerne comments that he would not include R.A. Stein or David Snellgrove (two of the scholars I rely upon for supplementary information) in his review because he considered their research did not reflect “values or attitudes extraneous to their research.” (Ibid).

⁵⁹ Edward W. Said, “Orientalism.” In *The Edward Said Reader*, edited by Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, 67–113 (London: Granta Books, 2001), 79.

⁶⁰ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), 65.

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of the living.⁶¹

Indeed, the work of the contemporary Tibetan artists can be seen as an insurgent act of cultural translation. They draw from their artistic heritage but employ a new visual language which represents a break from the past and from the strict dogma that governed Tibetan visual culture. However, their purpose is a renewal of Tibetan art and a re-negotiation of a modern Tibetan identity in the globalised world in which they take part, beyond the nostalgic image or Orientalist constructs. The new cultural spaces forged by art that defies the norms provide “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood ... that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”⁶² For Bhabha “[t]he social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.”⁶³

The artists of the contemporary Tibetan art movement form an elite minority within the Tibetan minority in China and in the Tibetan community in exile. It is their endeavours that push at the boundaries of what Tibetan culture is, and represent an on-going negotiation of identity within a culture and society which is undergoing transformation amidst colonisation, migration and globalisation.

Tibet’s unique socio-political situation, with its homeland now in China, a government-in-exile in India and widespread diaspora in the West, poses interesting and important questions with regard to identity in a globalised world that no longer conforms

⁶¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 7.

⁶² Ibid. 1–2.

⁶³ Ibid. 2.

to the centre-periphery paradigm, but rather accedes to a system of multi-directional cultural flows. The concept of a transnational artist and art movement, which is nevertheless identifiable by its cultural foundation, is an important area of inquiry in terms of what it can say about the evolution of society and culture in a globalised world.

Nicolas Bourriaud proposes that artists are now starting from a globalised state of culture. This means that hybridity, or rather eclecticism, is a natural state for artists as they draw their influences from different cultural traditions and temporalities. As Bourriaud notes: “Today, temporalities intersect and weave a complex network stripped of a centre.”⁶⁴ He coins the term ‘altermodern’, derived from the Latin for ‘other’, for the new modernism, resulting from a global dialogue.⁶⁵ In this paradigm, the ‘other’ is embraced, rather than marginalised and exoticised, in a plural society made up of ‘others’. Bourriaud continues: “In the geopolitical world ‘alterglobalisation’ defines the plurality of local opposition to the economic standardisation imposed by globalisation, i.e. the struggle for diversity.” Thus he defines ‘altermodernism’ as “the moment when it became possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from an assumed heterochrony, that is, from a vision of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities.”⁶⁶ He echoes Franz Fanon when he posits that a new form of modernism starts from the issues of the present, and not an obsessive return to the past.⁶⁷

This has important implications for the Eurocentric stranglehold over art history, notions of hybridity and Western cultural stereotypes of ‘the other’. By focusing on the contemporary art of the Tibetan communities in Lhasa and the West, my intention is to contribute to the post-Orientalist discussion of culture and meet with them on equal terms.

⁶⁴ Nichola Bourriaud “Altermodern.” *Altermodern–Tate Triennial*, 11–40 (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 12.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 12.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 13.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Outline of Chapters

In Chapter One, I examine how the traditional iconography of the Buddha has been re-interpreted by contemporary Tibetan artists. I first briefly explain the traditional iconometric rules for the construction of Buddhist deities in the iconography of Tibetan visual culture. As Harris notes in *In the Image of Tibet*, Panofsky proposes that systems of proportions reveal themselves as expressions of the ‘artistic intention’ (*Kunstwollen*), which may communicate the motivation in clearer terms than the art itself.⁶⁸ For example, systems of proportion may be based on the concept of the ideal (of beauty, harmony or spirituality), and consequently reveal something about the values of the culture that designed the system. I then examine how the contemporary artists deconstruct and reconstruct the iconography of the Buddha, this most important of Tibetan cultural symbols, in an era of the global consumer cult.

Chapter Two looks at the *maṇḍala*, probably the most recognisable Tibetan Buddhist iconographic symbol after the Buddha image. The *maṇḍala* has a deep connection with the Tantric texts of Tibetan Buddhism and in this regard I explore what artist Kesang Lamdark calls neo-Tantric art. The contemporary Tibetan artists borrow freely from the traditional iconography and visual culture in their reinterpretations of the *maṇḍala* that is now loaded with new layers of meaning of socio-political commentary.

Consideration is then given to some of the lesser deities or saints (*bodhisattvas*) of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon in Chapter Three. I contemplate some of the ‘Wrathful’ deities and their consorts and the role of Tantra in Tibetan art focusing on the *yab-yum* mystical union of the deity and female consort, showing how it is used in contemporary Tibetan art to address contemporary issues. I also examine the goddess Tārā, the major

⁶⁸ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), 83.

female figure of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan art, as portrayed in contemporary Tibetan art and the feminist role of the goddess in modern society.

In Chapter Four, I explore the concept of sacred geography, and the concepts of land and landscape, which in contemporary Tibetan art, extend to urban landscape. In this context, land is important to both cultural identity and the utopian myth/cultural stereotype associated with Tibet. I look at how the contemporary artists reconstruct the traditional chorographic iconography of Buddhist mythology.

Another important recurring theme of Buddhist art in general and specifically Tibetan art, is the aniconic image, which in terms of Buddhist art has a particular meaning. In Chapter Five, I consider works which draw on Buddhist concepts without referencing the Buddha image. Because some of the works may be likened to the aniconic Buddhist art which preceded the development of the figurative representation of the Buddha, this chapter forms the complete cycle of Buddhist art; from aniconic origins it passes through the stage of anthropomorphism and deification and then returns to the symbolic and metaphoric.

Finally, in Chapter Six I focus on the differences between the artists from Lhasa on one hand and artists from the diaspora on the other, which I have elucidated in earlier chapters, demonstrating how each group has negotiated its relationship between Tibetan culture and the forces of globalisation. At the same time, while there are many different journeys amongst the artists in the contemporary Tibetan art movement towards a hybrid art culture, I argue that what unites them is their common visual language, drawing on their Tibetan heritage, to engage with contemporary social and political issues.

Chapter 1. The Buddha Form

In this chapter, I discuss the role and the treatment of the Buddha form by contemporary Tibetan artists. The human form of the Buddha was not among the first motifs to be used in the iconography of Buddhist art, indeed it did not appear until around five hundred years after the death of the historical Buddha.⁶⁹ However, it is now the form most associated with Tibetan art and universally recognised and appreciated for both its aesthetic and symbolic significance. The classical Buddha form takes a central place in Tibetan identity. For Tibetans, Buddhism is not simply a religion but a way of life and driving force in Tibetan thinking: “Tibetan national and cultural identity has merged into their religious identity to the extent that Buddhism continues [to] influence the life of all Tibetans.”⁷⁰ Even while modern Tibetans have been subjected to enormous influences from Western and Chinese culture, Tibetan contemporary artists in both Lhasa and the West employ the Buddha form as fundamental to Tibetan culture and identity.

For contemporary Tibetan artists the Buddha form is a signifier of identity and culture and represents the holder of their history, a receptacle of memory. As one of the most widely known icons in the world, it is therefore a vehicle that easily transverses cultural boundaries as an allegorical device, as well as having wide appeal as an aesthetic form. Given the homogenous nature of its form, it is, paradoxically, the motif that seems to allow for the most multifarious interpretations and iterations, which testifies to the complexity of its nature and the philosophy for which it stands.

⁶⁹ David L. Snellgrove. *The Image of the Buddha* (Paris & Tokyo: Kodamsha International/UNESCO, 1978), 23.

⁷⁰ Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, *Human Rights Situation in Tibet, Annual Report 2009* (Dharamsala: TCHRD 2010), 110.

Representations of the Buddha in traditional Tibetan art are governed by strict rules which specify how he is to be depicted.⁷¹ The contemporary Tibetan artists whose work is discussed in this chapter have drawn on these traditions without adhering strictly to them, giving them a modern interpretation. While according to traditional rules regarding the depiction of the Buddha and deities of the Buddhist pantheon, these modern depictions of the Buddha may be offensive and sacrilegious to conservative devotees, I argue that the work of the contemporary Tibetan artists is not iconoclastic because they do not oppose the fundamental concepts of Buddhism even though they may depart from the traditional rules of iconometry governing Buddhist imagery and use unconventional materials and methods. The iconography is borrowed for its cultural significance, and in the process is given new cultural meaning beyond its original religious essence.

One artist who has explored the potential of the Buddha figure in his art practice over the years is Gonkar Gyatso. For Gyatso, his evolution as an artist is closely linked to the discovery of his Tibetan culture, as he travelled from a Tibet in which his traditional culture was suppressed, to the more cosmopolitan Chinese capital of Beijing, to exile in a Tibetan community in India, and finally to the West. Growing up in Lhasa during the Cultural Revolution, Gyatso had no opportunity to learn about his cultural heritage including the artistic traditions because religion at that time was forbidden.⁷² Then while at art school in Beijing, Gyatso suddenly had access to modern Western art, movies, literature and music; he read Nietzsche and Sartre and books on Millet and van Gogh.⁷³ When he returned to Lhasa after four years, the Tibetan city had also changed. As a result of Deng's 'Open Door' policy, religious practice was allowed again and cassette tapes of the Dalai Lama were being circulated, along with the revelation of a different version of

⁷¹ David P. Jackson and Janice A. Jackson. *Tibetan thangka painting, methods and materials* (London: Serindia Publications, 1984), 7, 49.

⁷² Interview with Gonkar Gyatso, Brisbane, 2011.

⁷³ Gonkar Gyatso, "No Man's Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet, The Experience of an Exiled Tibetan Artist." *Tibet Journal* (Vol. XXVIII, nos. 1 & 2, 2003, 147–160), 148; interview with G. Gyatso, Brisbane, 2011.

Tibetan history than the Chinese one Gyatso grew up with. He “became interested in Buddhism as a practise, as a philosophy and as a source of aesthetic inspiration,”⁷⁴ and attempted to make modern *thangkas* incorporating traditional motifs. However, it was not until he went to India that he studied *thangka* painting with exiled Tibetan masters.

Having learned the rules, however, Gyatso then proceeded on to break them. He was by then already a modernist as a result of his exposure to Western art during the years he spent studying at art school in Beijing in the 1980s, and he found that no-one in the conservative Tibetan community of Dharamsala understood his art.⁷⁵ He says, “In Tibet, my modernist style had been a survival tactic, but in exile it was unmarketable, and led to marginalization and rejection.”⁷⁶ Significantly, while in Dharamsala, Gyatso met Peter Towse from the St. Martin’s School of Art, who helped to organise a place for him at the college in London. In the West, Gyatso continued to explore Tibetaness and spirituality in his art practice. Throughout this journey, the Buddha form has been a constant in Gyatso’s art, although his medium, methods, intentions and expression have changed over the years. At the same time however, Gyatso has said that he struggles with the labels of Tibetan artist, national artist, international artist, and so on. He prefers to think of himself as a transnational artist.⁷⁷ Indeed, this is evident by both his journey across continents and by the subject matter of his art practice.

Buddha in Our Times (fig. 3), a work that Gyatso created for the 2008 Dubai Art Fair and then exhibited at the 17th Sydney Biennale, concerns globalisation.⁷⁸ The central figure is the classic Buddha form in silhouette, and is both monumental and elusive. Gyatso departs from the established traditions of colour, symbology and decoration of Buddhist iconography. Instead, he uses modern art methods to complete the

⁷⁴ G. Gyatso, “No Man’s Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet,” 148.

⁷⁵ Gonkar Gyatso, Interview, Sydney, May 2010.

⁷⁶ G. Gyatso, “No Man’s Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet,” 149.

⁷⁷ Conversation with artist, Brisbane 2011.

⁷⁸ Gonkar Gyatso, Artist’s Talk, MCA, Sydney Biennale, 13 May 2010.

work in order to impart a universal message relevant to contemporary life. Using stickers, *papier découpé* and pencil, Gyatso incorporates the images of modern life in juxtaposition with the Buddhist icon.

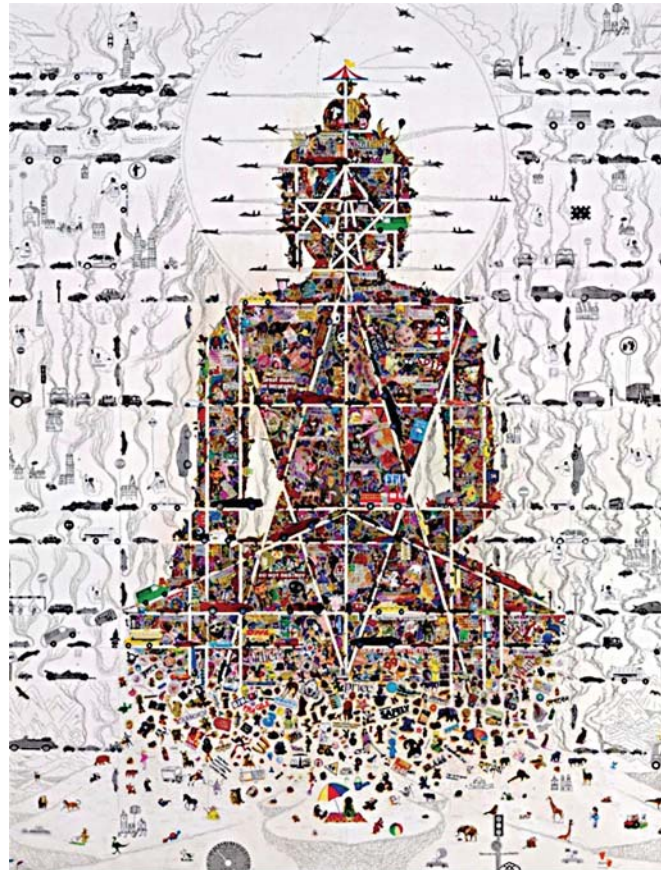


Figure 3. *Buddha in our Times*, 2008, Gonkar Gyatso, stickers, pencil and paper cut on treated paper, 152.5 x 122 cm. (White Rabbit Gallery)

Although Gyatso has used the Buddha figure in his work since the 1980s, he has been employing this collage style and method of working with stickers and paper cuttings since around 2003. He attributes the vibrant city life in London as a major influence in the development of his art practice, but also acknowledges a small debt to Matisse and other collage artists who Gyatso has researched over the years.⁷⁹

This work is exemplary of his 'sticker' works. It is loaded with modern images and icons of consumer culture (fig. 4) such as 'iPhone', 'Tesco', 'Sky', 'Kingfisher', as well as 'Ikea', 'Nokia', 'Omega', 'Virgin', Homer Simpson, Playboy Bunny, Snoopy,

⁷⁹ Gonkar Gyatso, Artist's Talk, MCA, Sydney Biennale, 13 May 2010.

Lion King, pandas, bar codes, and slogans such as ‘1/2 price’, ‘Broadband’, ‘Do not destroy’, ‘50% of all waxing’. Brands and advertising slogans litter the work like the stimuli of media overload in the modern world. These are the messages and images that bombard the mass media communication channels like modern *mantras*.

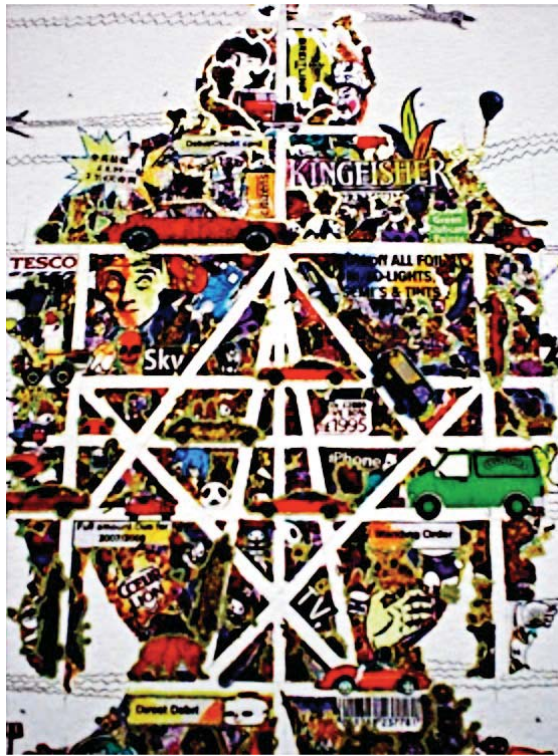


Figure 4. *Buddha in our Times* (detail)

I am reminded of the work of Naomi Klein in her book *No Logo* in which she discusses the modern obsession with brand identity that is waging war on public and private, internal and external, spaces.⁸⁰ Nothing is to be left unbranded and the search is always on for new markets, new space to extend the brand.⁸¹ Ordinary language and forms are legally and exclusively appropriated by corporations.⁸² The act of advertising is now more than scientific and legal, it is spiritual – corporate brand culture is like a cult. Brands are designed to evoke emotion; they are experiential, they encompass a whole lifestyle philosophy, and they are cultural accessories.

⁸⁰ Naomi Klein. *No Logo* (London: Flamingo, 2000), 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸² In my work as an intellectual property lawyer I saw corporations increasingly seeking to obtain exclusive legal rights to ordinary words, phrases and even colours.

I would argue that Gyatso is illuminating the global extent of the brand phenomenon and the way it has come to replace real spirituality and become its own kind of religion. While initially this brand culture seems to offer endless choice, there is in fact no choice because the brands are all the same in terms of product and market strategy. As Gyatso says, "... the freedom I have met in the West can be confusing as well as exciting because too many choices make for no choice."⁸³ In reaction to the superstimulus of global consumerism portrayed in his work, Gyatso has decided to pare back his own lifestyle. In his new apartment in New York, he says, for example, he has reduced his possessions to one cup, one bowl, one spoon, and so on.⁸⁴ His adoption of a minimalist lifestyle is motivated by what Buddhism says about attachment to material things.⁸⁵

Gyatso's art practice can be described as 'culture jamming',⁸⁶ where advertising is parodied and hijacked, turning it in on itself to throw into greater relief its true role in modern life. As Mark Dery said in his pamphlet *Culture Jamming*:

culture jammers ... introduce noise into the signal as it passes from transmitter to receiver, encouraging idiosyncratic, unintended interpretations. Intruding on the intruders, they invest ads, newscast, and other media artefacts with subversive meanings; simultaneously, they decrypt them, rendering their seductions impotent ... they refuse the role of passive shoppers, renewing the notion of a public discourse.⁸⁷

Gyatso's work also often contains nationalist sentiments and imagery cut from magazines and headlines that refer to Tibet, for example, the campaign to boycott the 2008 Olympics in China. In *Buddha in Our Times* he includes a cutting of a newspaper headline that simply reads "Vision of Tibet." He also sometimes uses Tibetan writing and

⁸³ G. Gyatso. "No Man's Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet," 150.

⁸⁴ Gonkar Gyatso, interview, Sydney, May 2010.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Mark Dery. "Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs," 2010. http://markdery.com/?page_id=154.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

other Tibetan designs. In relation to this he says,

I felt to use Tibetan cultural elements to address global issues, to participate in global cultural debates, would be a positive development. I used Tibetan elements, but not in a traditional way....⁸⁸

Buddha in Our Times, like a number of Gyatso's works, incorporates the traditional iconometric grid. The Buddha form is essentially constructed according to the traditional rules that he learnt in India. The image is faithful to the correct proportions of the Śākyamuni Buddha in seated position. Details such as his topknot or *uṣṇīṣa*, and the characteristic elongated ear-lobes⁸⁹ are all rendered in correct proportion.

Normally the iconometric grid would be painted out of a traditional *thangka*, however, Gyatso finds appeal in its compositional and aesthetic value.⁹⁰ Thus, in this work, the iconometric lines (or rather negative space in this case), which criss-cross the Buddha figure, now serve as a kind of cosmic highway network for the miniature vehicles (cars, planes and trucks) interspersed throughout the work. Consequently the viewer can see the grid's role in the construction of the Buddha form. Speaking of the iconometric grid in *Buddha in Our Times*, Gyatso says:

... for traditional artists it's part of the process, but when they get into the detail they always wipe it off the structure. But somehow I always do like to keep them ... I try to make it look like [a] motorway or highway. Because this is a work I did for Dubai ... I knew Dubai is something crazy about cars ... So I deliberately [make it] look like highway, it's lots of cars running.⁹¹

Gyatso forces the viewer, while contemplating the serene Buddha image, to confront the cacophony of the cluttered mind and the congested information super-highways of the modern world. In being confronted one can choose to meditate on any of

⁸⁸ G. Gyatso. "No Man's Land," 150.

⁸⁹ David L. Snellgrove. *The Image of the Buddha* (Paris & Tokyo: Kodamsha International/UNESCO, 1978), 52.

⁹⁰ G. Gyatso, Artist's talk, MCA, Sydney Biennale, 13 May 2010.

⁹¹ Ibid.

those things and consider the impermanence and attachment in relation to them. In this way Gyatso's work can be read as a modern Buddhist parable using familiar images to illustrate an ethical dilemma, that is, the exploitation of consumers by corporations and the concept of desire as a hindrance to true happiness and fulfilment. The iconometric grid, central to the image, is like a scaffold to which all these things affix.

As a number of contemporary Tibetan artists have explored the iconometric grid in their reinterpretation of Buddhist iconography, it is worth taking a brief look at the traditional Buddhist systems of proportions and the underlying principles governing their depiction of images in traditional Tibetan art.

Traditional Iconometry

Painting and sculpture were crucial to the religious life of Tibet; they were the mediums through which the highest ideals of Buddhism were evoked. Thus a sacred painting was an embodiment of enlightenment.⁹² In Tibet, painting and sculpture were traditionally part of the *rig gnas*, that is, the branches of knowledge of the same order as grammar, rhetoric, mathematics and astrology.⁹³

There are a number of Tibetan texts that deal with artistic theory and practice. The technical treatises concerned with the making of sacred images describe the dimensions and characteristics of sacred figures and other important iconography.⁹⁴ Buddhist iconometry based its types on the classifications of physiognomy in ancient India and can be traced back to the myth of the *mahāpuruṣa*, the 'great man' or saint, whose distinguishing bodily features defined the measurements of perfect creatures.⁹⁵ It was not

⁹² David P. Jackson and Janice A. Jackson. *Tibetan thangka painting, methods and materials* (London: Serindia Publications, 1984), 9.

⁹³ Giuseppe Tucci. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* (Rome: La Libreria Dello Stato, 1949) 291.

⁹⁴ D. P. Jackson and J. A. Jackson. *Tibetan thangka painting*, 7.

⁹⁵ Tucci. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, 294.

used to reproduce an ideal beauty but “the expression of an inner superiority, the manifestation, through signs and proportions, of a nature transcending humanity...”⁹⁶

Tibet followed the traditional Indian system of proportions, and the Indian texts and canons were translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit along with other Buddhist scriptures. Techniques for painting the Buddha entered Tibet at different times and from different regions. This resulted in a number of different systems of proportions for the Buddha image being utilised.⁹⁷

The *Citrakarmasāstra* (or *Vāstuvidyāśāstra*), a complex Sanskrit *śilpa* text dating from the fifth to seventh century CE and ascribed to Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom that deals with the construction of statues of the Buddhist Pantheon⁹⁸ describes no less than eighty measurements for the construction of a Buddha image, including the length between his nostrils, the distance between the eye and the eye-brow, the size of the eye and pupil, the ears, the fingernails and each of the toes. The text describes dire consequences for failing to conform to the iconometric rules as well as the benefits of correct proportion and construction.

The text also prescribes the composition of figures in a work comprising multiple effigies and describes the proper configurations for many other figures of the Buddhist pantheon. Postures, colours and ornaments of the different beings are prescribed.⁹⁹ The consistency in the representation of Buddhist personages means they can be recognised and identified by their colours, postures, hand gestures, ornaments and setting. Nothing at all, it seems, is left to chance or the whim of the artist. As David and Janice Jackson note,

⁹⁶ Tucci. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, 291.

⁹⁷ D. P. Jackson and J. A. Jackson. *Tibetan thangka painting*, 144.

⁹⁸ *The Vāstuvidyāśāstra ascribed to Mañjuśrī*. E.W. Marasinghe (trans) (New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, Indian Book Centre, 1989).

⁹⁹ *The Vāstuvidyāśāstra ascribed to Mañjuśrī*, Chapter XVI, verses 23–25.

there is little place for individual, original creation in traditional Tibetan *thangka* painting, where even the decoration is stereotyped.¹⁰⁰

The liturgical reasoning behind the Buddhist iconometric system is, as Tucci points out, premised upon the deity recognising himself in the perfected proportions of the image, so that he will descend into and dwell within it.¹⁰¹ There is no room for improvisation because if the deity's aspect does not correspond to the symbolic patterns that make it understandable to human beings, the deity himself cannot recognize his temporary embodiment in the image and will not make it his dwelling place.¹⁰² The Buddha image is a hypostatis and Tucci concludes that "[t]he artist is first and foremost an evoker, then a geometer and last a priest."¹⁰³

For the Buddha form, the length of the figure must be the same as the breadth of the extended arms. The intersection of two main lines, producing a square or a circle, is the perfect figure within which the image of the Buddha or deity is theoretically included.¹⁰⁴ After fixing the standard unit of measurement, the outline of the image is constructed geometrically starting from the vertical and horizontal axes. The drawing is completed in phases tracing new lines parallel to the first. From the points of intersection transverse lines are drawn forming triangles which determine the proportions of the different parts (see fig. 5–6).¹⁰⁵ These systems of rules and artistic manuals are still used by traditional Tibetan artists living in exile in India today.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ David P. Jackson and Janice A. Jackson. *Tibetan thangka painting, methods and materials. Op. Cit.*, 42.

¹⁰¹ Giuseppe Tucci. *To Lhasa and Beyond: Diary of the Expedition to Tibet in the Year 1948* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1987), 75.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰⁴ Tucci. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, 295.

¹⁰⁵ D. P. Jackson and J. A. Jackson. *Tibetan thangka painting*, 45.

¹⁰⁶ For example: Gega Lama. *Principles of Tibetan Art, Illustrations and explanation of Buddhist iconography and iconometry according to the Karma Gadri School* (Darjeeling, 1983).

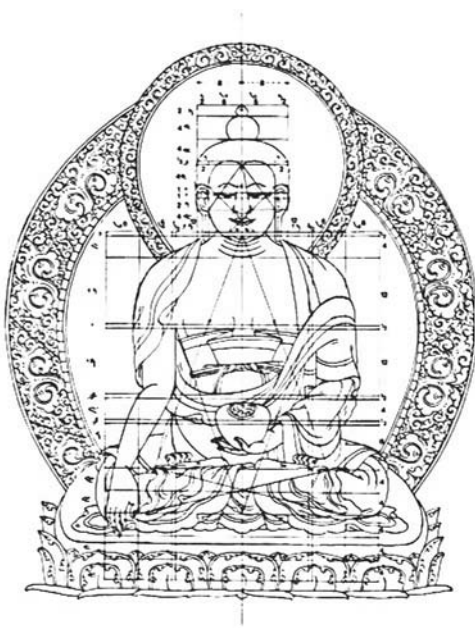


Figure 5. Śākyamuni Buddha with iconometric grid by Wangdrak
(D & J Jackson, *Tibetan thangka painting, methods and materials*, 1984, 57)

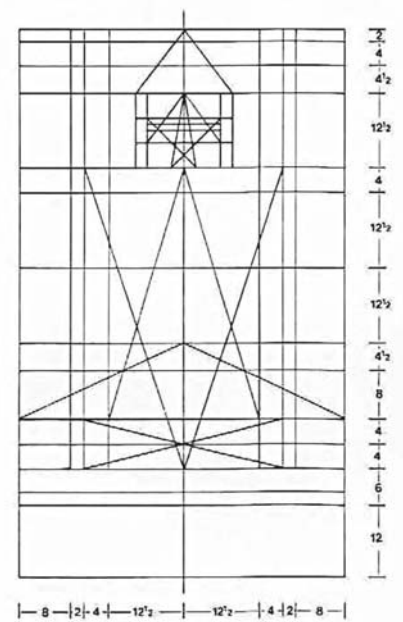


Figure 6. Basic grid construction for seated Buddha
(D & J Jackson, 1984, 55)

New Iconometry and the Buddha form

A number of the artists in the contemporary Tibetan art movement, particularly those who have had some training in traditional *thangka* painting, have experimented with the iconometric grid and incorporated it into their art as both an aesthetic and allegorical device. Two contemporary Tibetan artists, Tenzing Rigdol and Palden Weinreb, both based in New York, have deconstructed the Buddha form to its most basic and essential elements.

The two works, *Edifice SB (Line)* (fig. 7) by Weinreb, and *Poetry of Lines, No. 5* (fig. 8), by Rigdol, are nearly exact replicas of the traditional iconometric grid for the seated Buddha. However, these representations act not as scaffolding for an image, but as code for the Buddha in an almost aniconic way. That is, while the works do not depict the Buddha in human form, they allude to the Buddha using essential characteristics according to an established system of proportions.

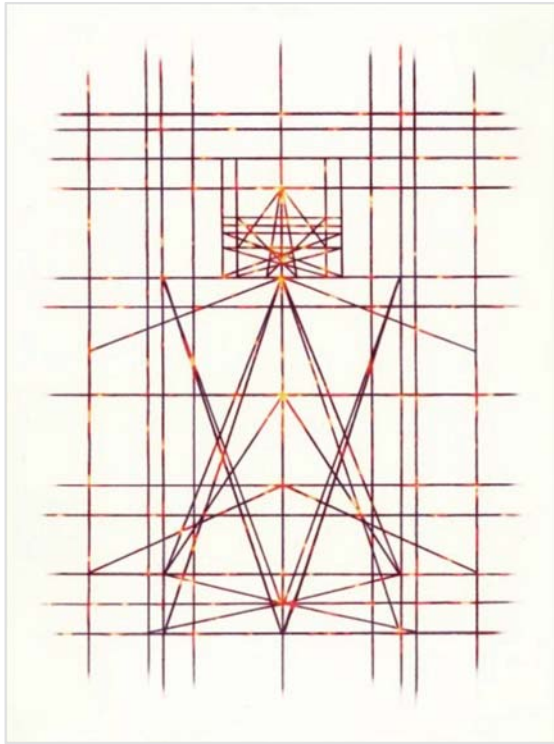
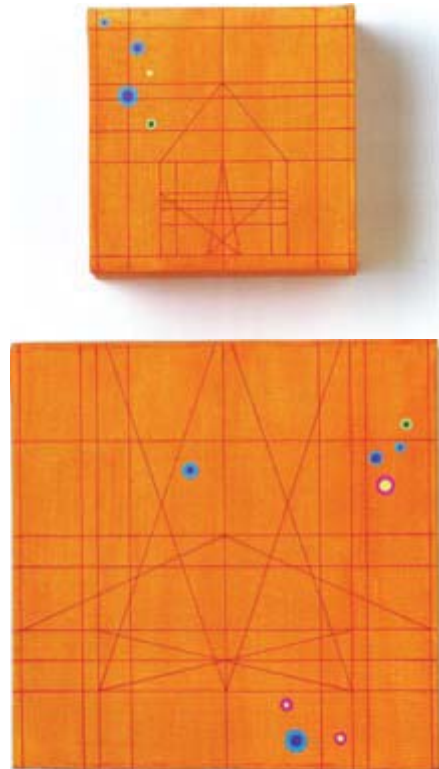


Figure 8. *Poetry of Lines, No. 5*, 2008, Tenzin Rigdol, acrylic on canvas (Rossi & Rossi, London)

Figure 7. *Edifice SB (Line)*, 2007, Palden Weinreb, lithograph (Rossi & Rossi, London)



Palden Weinreb's work, *Edifice SB (Line)* (2007) recalls the minimalist geometric wall drawings of Sol LeWitt,¹⁰⁷ and in doing so connects him to the circle of conceptual art in which the form is subordinated to the idea. However, in this work the form is essential to the idea. While at first glance the work is a minimalist geometric abstract that explores line and tension, it is essentially a portrait of the Buddha, symbolic of the structure of tradition that underpins a culture. The initials 'SB' in the title stand for 'Śākyamuni Buddha,' and again act as a code for Tibetan religion and Tibetan culture to which the Buddha is so closely linked. 'Edifice' refers to the construction of the form, and by analogy the Buddhist system. The word invokes the idea that the Buddha form is not simply drawn, but constructed according to an accepted system, as mentioned above.

¹⁰⁷ Weinreb considers Sol LeWitt an "artistic parent" (*Queens International 2012: Three Points make a Triangle*. Queens Museum of Art, New York). <http://common-name.com/QMA/index.php?/artists/palden-weinreb/>.

Likewise, Rigdol uses the iconometric grid in works such as *Poetry of Lines No. 5*. Weinreb's work most closely resembles the traditional iconometric grid for the seated Buddha form. However, Rigdol's work is more reductive, using only the lines essential for identification.

Rigdol grew up in Nepal where his family settled after fleeing Tibet and studied *thangka* painting and other traditional Tibetan art forms such as sand painting and butter sculpture. In 2002 his family were granted asylum in the United States and Tenzing went on to study art and graphic design at the University of Colorado. Although he has lived his whole life outside Tibet, his work continues to explore his Tibetaness in a hybrid fusion of Western art and design techniques and use of Tibetan cultural iconography.

Rigdol says that he seeks to reinterpret, in all possible ways, the traditional form of Tibetan visual culture “so as to loosen the tight aesthetic belt that Tibetans have been wearing since aeons.”¹⁰⁸ As he says:

Tibet is not over-blessed with multiple or differing approaches to aesthetics ... Hundreds of years of aesthetic endeavour, on the most part, have been invested only in promoting Buddhist ideology. ... Buddhist imagery ... is very deeply rooted in the everyday lives of the people. Hence, personally for me, there is no escape from it – at least for now, unless we deconstruct it and then reinterpret it.¹⁰⁹

Rigdol notes the irony of the resistance to change in the Tibetan social conscience, particularly with regard to contemporary art and cultural practices, when the concept of impermanence or change is fundamental to Tibetan Buddhist thought.¹¹⁰

Rigdol is drawn to the traditional iconometry of Tibetan art: “The lines are drawn in absolute proportions and then later they are covered in colours, to a point where one can barely feel the heartbeat of the poor lines.” He is fascinated by the subordination of

¹⁰⁸ Tenzing Rigdol, *Experiment with Forms* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2009), 5.

¹⁰⁹ Tenzing Rigdol, quoted by Francesca Gavin in “The Construction of Harmony,” *Experiment with Forms* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2009), 7.

¹¹⁰ Fabio Rossi & Tenzing Rigdol, *Experiment with Forms* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2009), 5.

line to colour¹¹¹ and experiments with the iconometric grid in his *Poetry of Lines* series (2008). Ridgol depicts a number of Buddhist deities against individual grid formulations. However, in *Poetry of Lines No. 5*, which resembles an exercise in Mondrian geometry, he depicts only the iconometric grid without the figure. To the traditional Tibetan painter this is an unfinished work, indeed a work hardly even begun. But in terms of Ridgol's contemporary art objective, it is a Buddha figure deconstructed and stripped down to its barest essentials, its proportions, and its prescribed calculations. But it still represents the Buddha in the most fundamental way, and appropriates the iconometric grid as a cultural object removed from the context of religion.

Karma Phuntsok, a Tibetan artist who has lived for many years in Australia, has also made radical use of the iconometric grid. Born in 1952, Phuntsok is one of the only contemporary Tibetan artists to have experienced, albeit as a child, a Tibet in which the Dalai Lama still lived and the arrival of the Chinese. Karma's family home was situated near the Jokhang temple in Lhasa, and he remembers the Chinese soldiers using the temple as a piggery. His family was among the first wave of refugees who followed the Dalai Lama into exile in 1959 when Phuntsok was about seven years old. The family first settled in Sikkim and during the 1960s Phuntsok went to a Tibetan boarding school in Mussoorie, India, where he started drawing with crayons supplied by the Red Cross. When he was sixteen or seventeen, he started training with a traditional *thangka* master. Later he continued his *thangka* training in Nepal before moving to Australia in 1981.¹¹²

Phuntsok uses the grid in allegorical ways. In his 2011 work *War Peace* (fig. 9) he superimposes the image of the historical Buddha and iconometric grid against a scene of devastation and destruction that stands for all the catastrophes that beset the world.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Ridgol, *Experiment with Forms*, 9.

¹¹² Conversation with Karma Phuntsok, Kyogle, N.S.W., July, 2011.

¹¹³ Ibid. (When I visited Karma Phuntsok's studio in Kyogle, in 2011, this work had only recently been finished and the artist had not decided on a final title. At that time, the artist called the work *Construction*.)



Figure 9. *War Peace*, 2011, Karma Phuntsok, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 75 cm (courtesy of the artist)

The monochromatic palette of the work produces a world drained of colour as if drained of hope and joy. Phuntsok's solution is to construct the world anew in the image of the Buddha, according to the Buddhist precepts of wisdom and compassion.¹¹⁴ He uses the iconometric grid purposefully, not just as a compositional device but as an allegorical device. The disaster scene of Phuntsok's work has a Brechtian quality of epic theatre. The work provokes reflection and a critical view. Phuntsok emphasizes the constructed nature of the world and of reality, which are equally subject to change. Like Brecht, Phuntsok uses the unexpected, in this case in the juxtaposition of the iconometric grid over an impressionist scene of desolation. Thus Phunstok, like Gyatso, does not confine the purpose of the iconometric grid to merely ensuring that the proportions of the Buddha figure are so exact that he may be able to recognise himself and descend to his dwelling place. Rather it is used as a metaphor for a moral and ethical construction of the world, in which suffering is relieved.

¹¹⁴ Conversation with Karma Phuntsok, Kyogle, N.S.W., July, 2011.

While Phunstok's first hand experience of growing up in Tibet prior to the Chinese occupation, for example seeing the desecration of the Jokhang Temple, may have informed the work, it is equally informed by the violence and destruction caused by war all over the world. The Buddha, as a metaphor for peace, is not at odds with the artist's life in the West.

Other uses of the Buddha Symbol

Apart from the use of iconometry, the figure of the Buddha has been employed in other ways by Tibetan contemporary artists. An installation work, called *Do What You Love* (fig. 10), was Gyatso's first foray into sculpture, and again it involved an aesthetic and metaphysical exploration of the Buddha form. The work consisted of twenty-five headless Śākyamuni Buddha sculptures in polyester resin with a bronze coating mounted on a black wall. The Buddhas are facing the wall so that it appears as if their heads are buried within the wall.



Figure 10. *Do What You Love*, 2010, Gonkar Gyatso, bronze and polyester resin, 25 Buddhas: 40.6 x 41 x 25 cm (Rubin Museum of Art, New York)

The installation was part of a group show of contemporary Tibetan artists at the Rubin Museum. Renowned for their collection of traditional Himalayan Buddhist art, the

Museum asked the contemporary artists to respond in their own style to a work in the collection. Gyatso chose for his inspiration a classical sculpture of the Buddha from the fourteenth century.¹¹⁵ It was scanned by a computer to make a three dimensional file and then the image was manipulated by tilting it forward fifteen degrees and removing the head. A mould of the headless Buddha was then produced which could be used to make multiple new sculptures.

Gyatso's inspiration for the work was the increasing frustration with the impasse in the 'China-Tibet situation', in which neither party could allow the other's point of view. Gyatso says that, while normally a Buddha sculpture would be sitting comfortably in a state of calm, he decided to turn the Buddha's face to the wall to symbolise the frustration. He wanted to express a kind of hopelessness. Gyatso, however, is quick to point out that he is not an extremist, but that he believes common ground should be found with the Chinese. Nevertheless, with twenty-five Buddha sculptures all facing the wall, it is a powerful work.¹¹⁶ With regard to the title, *Do What You Love*, Gyatso is expressing his playful side in the face of a dire situation. It is intended to be ironic and attempts to disarm the seriousness of the situation.¹¹⁷ While Gyatso denies the role of a political artist, he admits that this work is partly a political piece. Again, it is work in which the Buddha symbolises Tibet and Tibetaness.

Gyatso reprised this work in a series of exhibitions in Brisbane in 2011 and 2012, called *Do What You Love (Three Realms)*, over a number of venues.¹¹⁸ The installation at Griffith University Art Gallery encompasses a large darkened space surrounded by gold painted walls giving the impression of the capacious interior of a temple or *gompa*; a

¹¹⁵ Conversation with Gonkar Gyatso, Brisbane, 2011.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ The 'Three Realms' refer to the types of Buddhist realms in which rebirth takes place: the sense desire realms, the realms of form, and the realms of non-form (see for example: Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism, Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 43–44).

space to inspire awe and reverence, with the monumental collage Buddha sculpture as the centrepiece (fig. 11–12). On two opposing walls Gyatso has created an invented script combining Tibetan and Chinese characters, using his own thumbprints as brushstrokes, to compose the ‘Wheel of Life’ figure (a familiar theme in Tibetan art that illustrates the law of *karma* and one that Gyatso has returned to many times) and other auspicious symbols.

Figure 11. *Do What You Love (Three Realms)*, 2012, Gonkar Gyatso, Installation (Griffith University Art Gallery, Brisbane)



Figure 12. *Do What You Love (Three Realms)* (details)

Traditionally,¹¹⁹ the pig, the rooster and the snake representing ignorance, desire and aversion, are depicted within the centre of the ‘Wheel’. In order to break free of the cycle of *saṃsāra* and attain enlightenment one must overcome these obstacles. In place of

¹¹⁹ In traditional *thangka* or mural depictions the wheel is held by a terrible figure, usually Yama the Lord of Death, who represents impermanence. Within the spokes of the wheel are images of the realms of rebirth. On the outer rim of the wheel human figures represent the chain of causality or *saṃsāra*, a concept that explains how ignorance leads to an accumulation of *karma* and successive rebirths. (Fredrick W. Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2001).

the traditional iconography, Gyatso positions at the centre of the ‘Wheel’ the headless statue of Śākyamuni Buddha, originally created for the *Tradition Transformed* exhibition at the Rubin Museum in 2010.

As with the installation in the Rubin Museum, the two wall-mounted Buddha sculptures in the *Three Realms* installation have their backs to the room and their heads apparently buried in the wall. They have been covered in stickers and *papier decoupe* of brand names, advertising and icons of mass media and consumer culture. Placed at the centre of the ‘Wheel’ they stand in for the traditional symbols of ignorance, desire and aversion: the headless Buddha is ignorance, and the stickers represent desire and aversion.

Within the darkened space of the installation scattered around the floor in various states of disarray are more bronze headless Buddhas. They are upturned, knocked over, fallen where they lay, or tumbled forward so that their heads appear buried in the floor. Sand is scattered on the floor and on the Buddhas. Each sculpture is spotlit like shards of light penetrating the cracks of a ruined temple. The scene is one of destruction and wreckage. Overseeing all, seated on a low platform taking the place of the lotus throne, is an intact sculpture of Śākyamuni Buddha in lotus position and earth-touching *mudrā*.¹²⁰ Covered in the labels of modern life – symbols of conditioned existence – he surveys serenely the vista of decay and change. Underneath the stickers the Buddha’s head, which is perfect in form with spirals of hair and elongated ear-lobes, appears suffocated. The covering of the eyes and mouth with stickers illustrates the strength of the illusion of happiness created by the material world and culture of consumerism; his words are

¹²⁰ Earth-touching or earth-witnessing *mudrā*: *bhūmiśparśa mudrā* – a symbolic posture that usually identifies the image as Śākyamuni Buddha. The right arm is pendant over the knee with the fingers extended toward the ground. It refers to the moment in the Buddha’s story immediately prior to his attaining enlightenment when, after being challenged by Māra, he called on the earth to witness his right, by virtue of his accumulation of merit over his lifetimes, to be seated at the place of future Buddhas. (see Warren, Henry Clarke (trans.) *Buddhism: Pali Text with English Translation (Introduction to the Jātaka)*. Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, [1896] 2008; Rhys Davids, T.W. (trans.) *Buddhist Birth Stories; or Jātaka Tales* (London: Trubner & Co. Ludgate Hill, [1880] 2000). It has come to signify both the moment of the Buddha’s enlightenment and his defeat of Māra, the evil one.

silenced and teachings stifled by the earthly objects of attachment and desire in the form of labels and brands, advertising and headlines, representing the modern day *mantras* and icons of devotion: the new creeds. The viewer may meditate on the decline of spiritualism and ascent of consumerism in the world, or reflect on the archaic nature of a dogma that would have an artist perish for miscalculating the proportions of an image.

On a socio-political level, the scene also references the destruction of Tibetan temples following the Chinese occupation and during the Cultural Revolution. A metaphorical reading extends the decay and destruction to the larger idea of the Tibetan culture and society and its erosion by assimilation into greater China. However, Gyatso has often insisted that the purpose of his art is not to make propaganda statements regarding the Chinese-Tibet political situation. It is part of a bigger picture and Gyatso is cognisant of the many troubles that afflict this planet.¹²¹

The central Buddha sculpture was the centre-piece for the *Kiss the Sky* exhibition in Brisbane in 2011. Gyatso presented a similar Buddha sculpture in ‘earth-touching’ *mudrā*, covered in stickers and *papier decoupe*, which formed part of a series of eight sculpture installations named after the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism.¹²² (fig. 13)

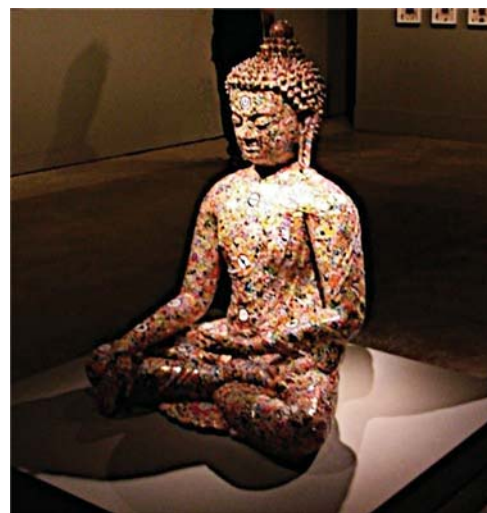


Figure 13. *Buddha*, 2011, *Kiss the Sky* installation
Gonkar Gyatso, Buddha cast, stickers, paper cut
(Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane)

¹²¹ Gonkar Gyatso: conversation with author in Sydney, 12 May 2010; and panel discussion at Griffith University Art Gallery, Brisbane (as part of the *Three Realms* exhibition), 24 February 2012.

¹²² Golden Wheel, Golden Fish, Lotus, Victory Banner, Endless Knot, Parasol, White Conch Shell and Treasure Vase. See for example Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999, 171–187).

Covered in stickers and *papier decoupe*, these sculptures constitute a progression from Gyatso's collage works on paper. The Buddha sculpture model is ornamented and recalls the devotional application of *mille feuille* of gold leaf that is placed on Buddha sculptures in temples in parts of Asia. The act of placing the flakes of gold leaf is an act of devotion as well as an offering and it is the act of offering that Gyatso says is part of his motivation for making his art.¹²³ The application of gold leaf also has the consequence of enhancing the beauty of the statue, intensifying the golden glow and splendour of the religious object which is precious in both spiritual and monetary terms. In the case of Gyatso's Buddhas, layers of stickers and patterns overlap and meld into spaces of intermingling colour. There are cartoon characters, icons of cinema and fiction, brand names and logos, as well as advertisements and newspapers and magazines headlines. On each sculpture a conspicuous sticker with a representation of an invented 'auspicious' symbol marks the points of the Tantric Buddhist channel-wheels (*cakras*).¹²⁴ For example, the *Golden Wheel* sculpture has a sticker with a gas mask head symbol at his heart *cakra*. As with his paper works, Gyatso uses these Buddha models as scaffolds for the profound issues which concern modern life, such as consumerism and environmental issues.

Speaking of this exhibition, Gyatso says that it marks a starting point of shifting in a new direction. Although he is Tibetan, Gyatso considers himself more than that because of the journey his life has taken over different continents and cultures. But he says, his Tibetaness is something he can't get rid of and it will always show in his work.¹²⁵ While there are many cultural clues in his work, not all of them obvious, it is the Buddha form which remains the most tangible cultural identifier for Gyatso's Tibetaness.

¹²³ Gonkar Gyatso, panel discussion at Griffith University Art Gallery, Brisbane (as part of the *Three Realms* exhibition), 24 February 2012.

¹²⁴ The Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhist channel-wheel system, based on the Hindu *cakra* system, has five channel-wheels representing body, speech, mind, qualities and activities of an enlightened being. Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999, 135–144).

¹²⁵ Gonark Gyatso, conversation with artist in Brisbane, 2011.

The Buddha in Lhasa

The contemporary Tibetan artists, in both the diaspora and in Lhasa, utilise the Buddha form as a cultural identifier. Additionally, both groups use the Buddha in metaphorical ways to express their views regarding broader issues, such as globalisation. The artists of the diaspora retain their link to their Tibetan identity through the Buddha form while they are far from the land of their heritage and immersed in foreign cultures. However, the artists of the diaspora use the vehicle of the Buddha to demonstrate the changes wrought on Tibet by outside influences, both Western and Chinese. At the same time, the Lhasan artists contest the stereotyping of Tibetan identity by reference to Buddhism. Their focus is to depict a modern Tibet as it is, not a static society of memory or imagination.

Gade, who is one of the leading contemporary artists working in Lhasa today, has become well known for his ‘Neo-*thangka*’ works, which seek to challenge the preconceptions of Tibetan art by adopting the design and layout of religious painting but substituting deities for modern icons that more aptly fit with life and reality in modern Tibet. In his *New Buddha* series (2008) (fig. 14–16) Gade uses a traditional compositional format of Tibetan Buddhist deity *thangkas*.



Figure 14, Figure 15, Figure 16. *New Buddha* series: *McDonalds*, *Spiderman*, *Mao Jackets*, 2008, Gade, mixed media on canvas, 99.6 x 120 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

In traditional arrangements of composition in *thangka* painting the central subject is placed in a realm beyond normal space and time.¹²⁶ The central figure, be it a Buddha, deity or important lama in the lineage, is normally seated on a throne often with a lotus flower which is a standard Buddhist symbol dating back to the earliest Buddhist art in India. It signifies the divine birth and the perfected spiritual state of the being. The main deity or principal figure is portrayed in the centre surrounded by smaller images of lesser figures, descending in rank.

There are a number of traditionally established groupings, including the repetitive depictions of a large number of figures. These compositions consist of a central main figure surrounded by many smaller identical figures. The lesser figures, numbering from one or two hundred are arranged in vertical and horizontal columns. These kinds of *thangkas* were usually painted with a red or black background with the figures outlined in gold. These *thangkas* were usually commissioned because there was felt to be greater merit in numbers. By multiplying the number of figures the patron multiplied the force of his merit or the force of the deity to counteract a problem or obstacle.¹²⁷ This is the compositional model of *thangka*, sometimes called the ‘thousand Buddha’ or ‘myriad Buddha’,¹²⁸ which Gade has used for this series.

However, in Gade’s *New Buddha* series, instead of the traditional Buddha images we are presented with Spiderman, Ronald Macdonald, and Red Guard, as principal deity. The backgrounds are painted with ‘thousand Spiderman’, ‘thousand McDonalds’ and ‘thousand Mao Buddha’ images. They are the modern heroes that we now visualise and admire, instead of the old deities. We can see these super-heroes on television or film and experience their adventures; we can imagine ourselves as having their attributes, their

¹²⁶ David P. Jackson and Janice A. Jackson. *Tibetan thangka painting, methods and materials* (London: Serindia Publications, 1984), 25.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 26–27.

¹²⁸ Pratapaditya Pal. *Art of the Himalayas* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1991), 177–178.

postures and their *mantras*. *Spiderman* is shown with one leg partly extended like Green Tārā, ready to jump up and come to the rescue. His hands are in teaching *mudrā*, but what does he teach? The comic book super-hero is an ethical hero and good always vanquishes evil. *Ronald Macdonald* is shown in meditation *mudrā*. In place of the usual attributes, he is holding a hamburger; a staple of modern life and symbol of globalisation. The hamburger is his symbol, one of the attributes by which we recognise him just as we recognise the Buddha and other deities by their special symbols and attributes. In the Red Guard Buddha we recognise the Buddha by his topknot and elongated ears, and the Red Guard persona by his Mao Jacket and red arm-band. The figure combines two very different types of liberators, Mao who purported to liberate Tibet from the colonial imperialists, and the Buddha, whose form of liberation is spiritual not material.

These are the icons of Gade's youth and life in Lhasa that have replaced the traditional Buddhist deities. Gade grew up in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution in which the Red Guards in Mao suits were ever present. So we see Cultural Revolution iconography being appropriated and reinterpreted in his work. With regard to the other icons, Spiderman reminds him of his childhood reading comics and watching Spiderman movies, and McDonalds has become the new ubiquitous icon, even in Tibet.¹²⁹

Although Gade is aware that his work may offend some Buddhists, his imagery comes from an attempt to locate traditional Tibetan art in a contemporary context and imagine what a Tibetan painting looks like when it is detached from religion.¹³⁰ His works are suffused with a sense of humour which can be irreverent in its mockery, but also poignant in its satirical insight. Throughout, he draws deeply from Tibetan visual tradition often using handmade paper, mineral pigments and traditional compositions.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Conversation with artist, Lhasa, 2010.

¹³⁰ Gade. "Artist's statement," *Mushroom Cloud* exhibition catalogue (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Gallery, 2008), 63.

¹³¹ Conversation with artist, Lhasa, 2010.



Figure 18. Śākyamuni with Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Lamas, Mid 13th century, Central Tibet, *thangka*, gouache on cotton, 99 x 80 cm. (Private collection, Switzerland, Wisdom & Compassion exhibition)

Figure 17. *Thousands Bound*, 2010, Gade, acrylic and natural pigment on cotton canvas, 135 x 180 cm (Peaceful Wind Gallery, Santa Fe)



In his work *Thousands Bound* (2010) (fig. 17), Gade parodies a more complex Tibetan *thangka* model that involves multiple deities with a Buddha figure at its centre and utilisation of Cultural Revolution iconography. In traditional compositions (fig. 18) the central deity is usually seated on a throne and flanked by attendants or *bodhisattvas* with various symbols of their attributes. The central group is then surrounded by further rows of *arhats*¹³² all with bright aureoles signifying their holiness. They may be joined by revered lamas and important personages of the different Tibetan Buddhist lineages, benign and wrathful deities, possibly including the four guardian deities at the four corners, as well as all manner of mythical creatures. They may be placed in fantastical settings of trees, mountains, gardens and temples, which form vignettes of scenes from

¹³² Arhat: worthy one, perfected person (Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed), *In the Buddha's Words* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 469.

their lives. In this type of composition, the two main disciples of the Buddha are placed by his side, to the left and right.¹³³

In Gade's curious and eccentric version of a *thangka*, the central figure of the Buddha is indeed seated on his throne but with his eyes veiled as if to screen him from the bizarre goings on around him. He is flanked by two attendants, a female Red Guard on one hand and a Minnie Mouse in hot pink bikini and high heels on the other. On either side of the central group are sets of would-be *arhats* illuminated by aureoles. However, the *arhats* are all Mickey Mouses and more Red Guard-Buddhas also with veiled eyes. Above the columns of *arhats* are four Chinese soldiers who stand in for the four Guardian deities. Above the central group, in place of an important sacred figure, is a cartoon version of a many-armed wrathful deity flanked by two pairs of ludicrous rutting beasts. On the top-most row, in place of the five most important Vajrayāna Buddhas¹³⁴ we find Spiderman Buddha, Mickey Mouse Buddha, Ronald McDonald Buddha and E.T. Buddha, all in seated position. In the centre, parodying the Reclining Buddha, we find a reclining Mao Tse Tung, with an aureole surrounding his head, in a field of sunflowers. This is no doubt a reference to his cult of personality during the Cultural Revolution when he was revered as the Red Sun of China.¹³⁵

The lower half of the work more resembles a burlesque show. We see monks cavorting with Red Guards in a circle dance. We see the hands of puppeteers manipulating puppets dressed as Tibetan nomads or death and an acrobatic troupe made up of monks, animals and birds. This group seems to illustrate a more bizarre version of the Buddhist parable of the Four Brothers (of which more will be said in a later chapter). All around are fantastical mythical creatures and plants. Like many of Gade's more complex works, the canvas is crowded with individual scenes, images and symbols, all of

¹³³ D. P. Jackson and J. A. Jackson. *Tibetan thangka painting*, 26.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³⁵ Interview with Nyandak and Nortse, Lhasa 2010.

which have relevance to his traditional culture or modern life.

Gade appropriates the iconography of Tibetan religious painting and suffuses it with images of modern life and imagination to demonstrate how the old ideologies are being displaced by the new imported ones of consumerist society. Old Buddhist icons are replaced with the icons of modern culture which are flooding the Tibetan consciousness. He is depicting a society in transition. In a mix of Tibetan and global culture, Gade asks us to consider the implications of rapid and radical social change. He juxtaposes contexts and imagines what Tibetan art looks like without religion.¹³⁶ It is then we realise that even out of a religious context so much of the symbolism is cultural, ethnographic. Just as contemporary Western art may contain symbols of, or references to, Christianity without becoming religious art, Gade's neo-*thangka* art is secular, for all its religious symbolism.

Yet it is also full of questions regarding Buddhist Tibetan culture and the socio-political marriage with modern China and cultural influences from the West. Modern Tibetan culture is now an amalgam of a number of influences: traditional Tibetan, which includes the earlier influences from India and Nepal; Chinese influences which include economic, political, historical and demographic elements; and Western elements which come either directly through exchange with visitors and tourists or through a China that has adopted certain Western features. Thus, in modern Tibet, the Buddha figure is joined by the figures of Mao and Red Guards from the Cultural Revolution period, as well as Western icons, such as Ronald McDonald and Mickey Mouse. Consequently, for Gade, the traditional *thangka* does not reflect the realities of modern Tibet.

Gade also explores the idea of cultural dilution in other works. In 2006 he created a work in collaboration with photographer Jason Sangster, entitled *Ice Buddha Sculpture No. 1 – Lhasa River* (fig. 19). First shown at the *Lhasa – New Art from Tibet* exhibition in

¹³⁶ Conversation with artist, Lhasa, 2010.

Beijing in 2007, the work comprises photographic images of an installation-performance work. Gade gathered water from the Kyi Chu River which runs through Lhasa, and used a mould to create an ice sculpture of Śākyamuni Buddha. Sangster's photographic images document the melting of the ice Buddha sculpture in the river.

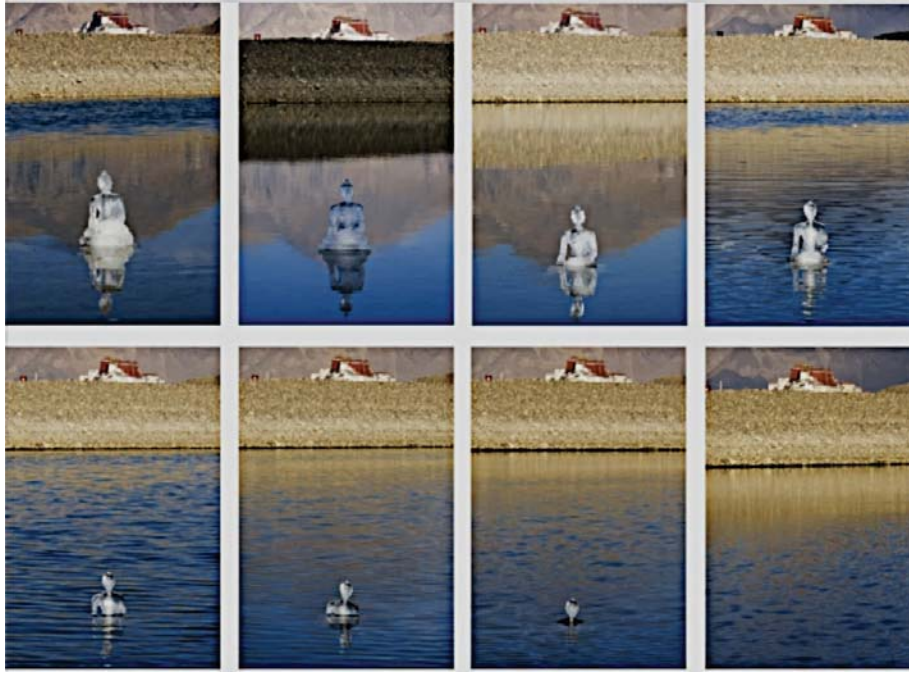


Figure 19. *Ice Buddha Sculpture No. 1 Lhasa River*, 2006, Gade (and Jason Sangster) digital photographs, 80 x 50 cm, edition of 12 (Red Gate Gallery, Beijing)

The Potala Palace, the traditional residence of the Dalai Lamas, visible in the background of the images situates the work in its cultural context. Gade explained that the work is about “the cycle of birth, life and death, solidifying raw elements into solid form and returning to the raw elements.”¹³⁷ As mentioned previously, this concept is central to Buddhist philosophy, and applies universally. The work has particular reference to the dilution and deterioration of traditional Tibetan culture, signified by the Buddha form, since the occupation of the Chinese in the middle of the twentieth century. The Buddha sinking into the Lhasa River with the iconic image of the Potala Palace in the background is a powerful metaphor for the loss of Tibetan society and culture. At the same time the

¹³⁷ *Lhasa – New Art from Tibet*, catalogue, (Brian Wallace, ed) (Beijing: Red Gate Gallery, 2007), 42.

work appears restrained. The Buddha form seems to particularly lend itself to expressions of peace and pacification, perhaps due to its harmonious proportions and association with a state of tranquillity. However, the images belie an underlying violence.

The Lhasan artists often address socio-political issues using complex or coded language. Their work can appear opaque in meaning due to the use of unfamiliar, often peculiar, and idiosyncratic symbolism in combination with an allegorical approach. It is not surprising, given the political constraints under which they work, that they may wish to disguise the import of their work. Simon Zhen suggests that habitual self-censorship, which is common in China and Tibet, may be the result of the internalisation of the censorship imposed by the State, which reached its apogee during the Cultural Revolution but still exists today.¹³⁸ However, this results in complex works that contain many layers of meaning. Indeed, it is impossible to grasp all the references without understanding the local vernacular and in-group puns, word play and other metaphorical devices that may be popular from time to time, as well as idiosyncratic symbolism employed by different artists as camouflage. Accordingly, this kind of self-censorship also contains an element of dissent and resistance which is crucial to identity and self-determination. This is evident in the work of Tsering Nyandak (Nyandak).

Nyandak is one of the group of gifted contemporary artists working in Lhasa who also uses the damaged Buddha figure as a metaphor for the destruction of Tibetan culture, impermanence and change. Nyandak spent some years in exile in India but chose to return to Tibet. This gives him a unique perspective on Tibetan culture, having seen both the efforts for preservation in Dharamsala, and the radical changes in Lhasa. The use of the Buddha form in his work is an identifier of Tibetan culture. In the works, *Paper Plane* and *Buddha Head* (2008), Nyandak addresses practical social issues. For example, in

¹³⁸ Zhen, Simon K. "An Explanation of Self-Censorship in China: The Enforcement of Social Control Through a Panoptic Infrastructure." *Inquiries Journal* (Vol 7, no. 9, 2015). www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1093.

Buddha Head (fig. 20), Nyandak is referring to the process of moving nomadic Tibetans into concrete houses so that their traditional ways of living are altered. In these new situations they are prevented from undertaking their customary pilgrimages, and from grazing their animals on the grasslands.¹³⁹ This “development brings on the disappearance of a lot of traditional elements.”¹⁴⁰ In this work the Buddha’s head, representing Tibetan tradition and culture, is being transported to another place as a metaphor for an altered way of life.



Figure 20. *Buddha Head*, 2008, Tsering Nyandak, acrylic and oil on canvas, 128 x 128 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

Nyandak says he uses the Buddha, not because of his religious inclination but “as a physical object that relates to me and my surroundings. It’s objectified, but also works as a container. Every object can hold information, so the Buddha head has certain information it can give; whether that be of a stereotypical, mythical or romantic nature ...”¹⁴¹ Indeed, as we have seen, the Buddha’s head or Buddha form is the repository of profound significance and a receptacle of memory.

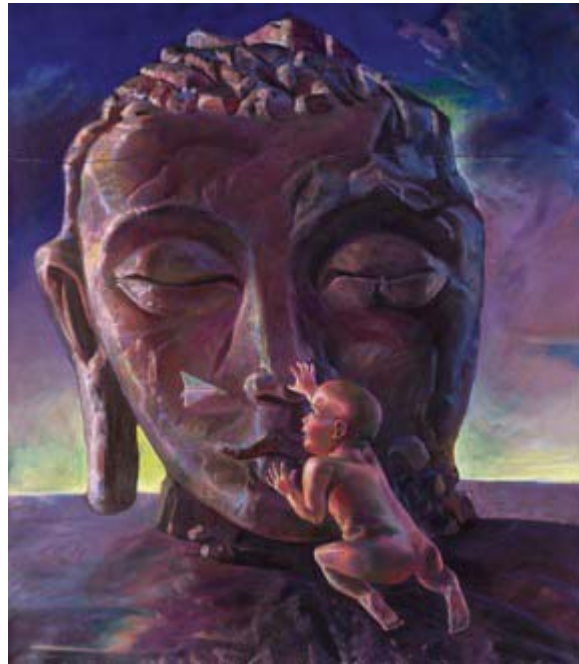
¹³⁹ Nyandak. Conversation with artist, Lhasa, 2010.

¹⁴⁰ Nyandak. “Tsering Nyandak in Conversation with Kabir Mansingh Heimsath,” in *The Lightness of Being* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2008), 8.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

Thus Nyandak's use of the Buddha is more to do with identity than form, it is more allegorical than aesthetic. His work often concerns the attachment to Buddhism and tradition. Nyandak, who follows Tibetan Buddhist teachers in the West, feels that Tibetans often cling to their Tibetan Buddhist traditions without real understanding of the extent to which they hide behind them.¹⁴² Nyandak is ambivalent about his cultural traditions and the place they have in the modern world. This is not untypical of a younger generation in any society whose realities are no longer that of their parents. At the same time Nyandak is a believer in self-determination and often expresses in his work a powerlessness in the face of forced change.

Figure 21. *Paper Plane*, 2008, Tsering Nyandak, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 149 x 129 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)



Paper Plane (fig. 21) again concerns the destruction of tradition. This work is one of a series that feature baby or child figures and the nakedness of the baby signifies innocence; the innocence and naivety of the Tibetan people in the face of forced social and political change.¹⁴³ However, Nyandak likes ambiguity in his work so that meanings can be multi-layered or universal.¹⁴⁴ In fact, he doesn't like to explain the symbolism in

¹⁴² Nyandak, Conversations with author, Lhasa, 2010.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Nyandak. "Tsering Nyandak in Conversation with Kabir Mansingh Heimsath," 9.

his work, but would rather leave interpretation to the viewer. Thus, his use of objects such as the paper plane or balloon, or the colour red, does not necessarily have a fixed conceptual significance. Nevertheless, Nyandak's propensity for elusive or ambiguous symbolism can be interpreted as a symptom of the tendency to self-censorship that he shares with other Lhasan artists.

This period in his work is marked by his use of vast, empty landscapes (which are quintessentially Tibetan and at the same time ambiguous) and ominous skies pressing down that give the impression of both space and claustrophobia at the same time. Similarly, his palette is full of both light and melancholy – like a half-life. Nyandak has no training in traditional *thangka* painting and, in any case, it is not his purpose to represent the Buddha's head in a perfect form, quite the opposite. In *Paper Plane* the head of Śākyamuni Buddha is easily recognisable by the curls of hair on his head, elongated ear-lobes and eyes closed in meditation. The face remains serene despite the scarring. It is monolithic but damaged. His hair itself is like a rocky jagged landscape echoing the mountainous topography of Tibet. The strand of wire cutting across the painting on the level of the Buddha's forehead is also ambiguous, but it can be read as a barrier, a fissure, a separation from; it looks dangerous. The innocent child at the base of the head does not appear to understand what the head (he's chasing the paper plane) is, only that it is familiar, safe – it is tradition and identity.

In 2006 Nyandak collaborated with another Lhasan artist, Yak Tseton, on a digital photographic project comprising five images collectively titled *sTon pa (Buddha)*.¹⁴⁵ The work deals with modernisation and the global homogenisation of culture. In *Skyscraper Buddha* (fig. 22) the wire structures and superimposed Buddha image evoke the idea of

¹⁴⁵ The Tibetan word *sTon pa*, means to instruct or reveal, and teacher, and is an epithet for the Buddha.

modern city skyscrapers carrying giant advertising messages.¹⁴⁶ The simulated scaffolding or iconometric framework acts as a cage behind which the Buddha is looking out. Whilst Buddhism occupied the central position of visual culture in traditional Tibetan society, it has been replaced with the advertising of commercial life that drives consumerism. The digital billboard design does not necessarily reinstate the Buddha's visual prominence as Brian Wallace suggests¹⁴⁷ but rather demonstrates how the image of the Buddha has been appropriated for commercial purposes.¹⁴⁸

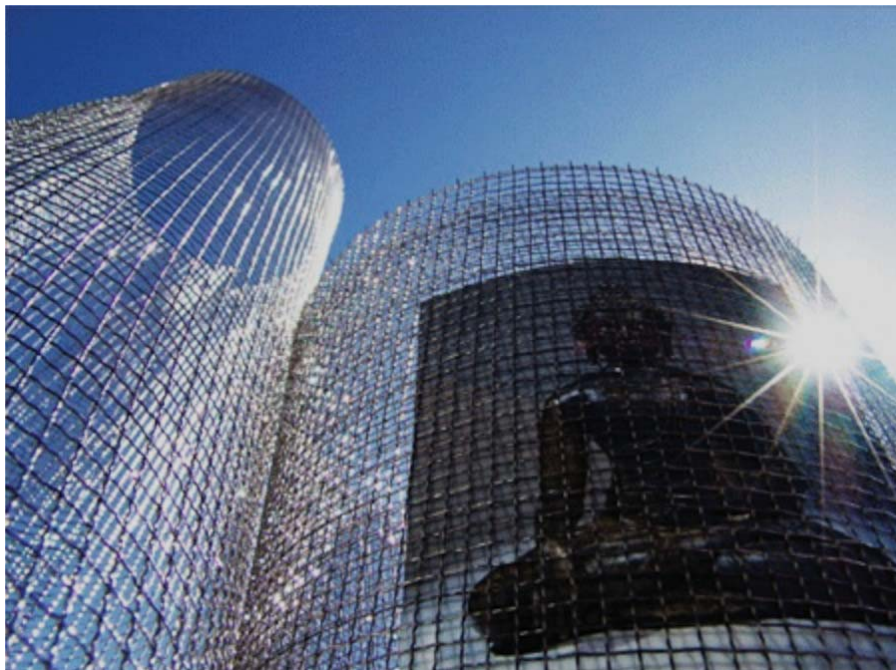


Figure 22. *sTon pa (Skyscraper Buddha)* 2006, Tsering Nyandak & Yak Tseten, photograph, 60 x 80 cm (Red Gate Gallery, Beijing)

Interestingly, two Sydney Biennales (2010 and 2012) have used the Buddha image as their headline banner and standard-bearer. In 2010 the image was provided by Gonkar Gyatso's *Buddha in Our Time* (discussed above), and in 2012 by Gade, (figs. 23, 24). The works were patently used to 'brand' and 'sell' the Biennale. They projected an image of universality; they said that the gallery is a temple, that art equals religion, that

¹⁴⁶ Brian Wallace (ed). *Lhasa – New Art from Tibet* (Beijing: Red Gate Gallery, 2007), 42.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Conversation with artist, Lhasa, 2010.

the exhibition is not superficial or impenetrable but spiritual and fashionable, cosmopolitan and tolerant. The commercial strategy to promote the Biennale and attract customers is the very same strategy used by corporations in promoting the ‘lifestyle’ of their international brands, the very brands which adorn Gonkar Gyatso’s Buddha. Thus the Buddha image has become not only a religious icon, but a very marketable commercial one.

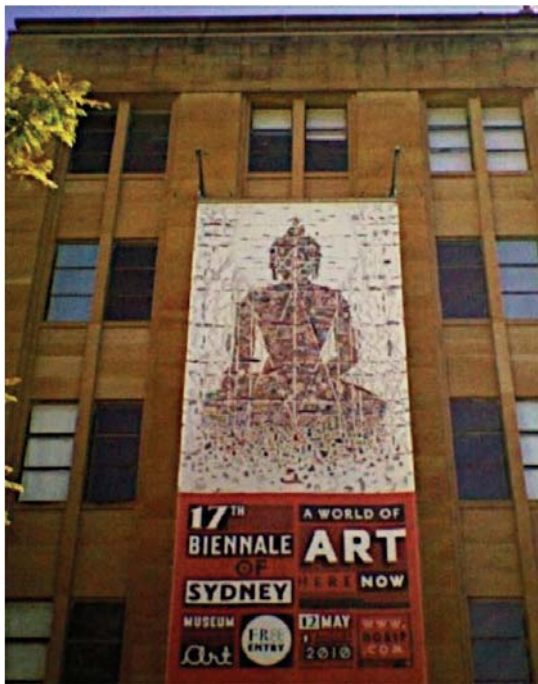


Figure 23. Sydney Biennale banner 2010, (Gonkar Gyatso)



Figure 24. Sydney Biennale banner 2012, (Gade)

In this chapter I have examined the portrayal of traditional Tibetan iconography in the form of the Buddha by some contemporary Tibetan artists. I have argued that although the artists do not comply with the ancient rules for creating Buddhist art, far from being iconoclastic, they reinterpret traditional iconography in a way that is relevant to the modern world. The works retain a sense of the allegorical in the exploration of new Tibetan culture and identity. The Buddha form is also often used as a metaphorical device

for universal issues. As we have seen, the artists in Lhasa often employ the Buddha form to explore the dilution and erosion of Tibetan culture. In the West, the Buddha form is a symbol of the artists cultural and ethnic identity.

In the sphere of Tibetan visual culture, the contemporary artists are no longer confined by exclusively religious purposes or institutions. They have freed themselves from cultural and ideological boundaries. While the iconography, concepts and legends are part of their cultural identity and identity as artists, they have reconstructed the Buddha in their own image.

Chapter 2. *Maṇḍala* – Neo-Tantra

The iconography of the *maṇḍala* appears in a great many works of both traditional and contemporary Tibetan art. It holds major importance in Tibetan visual culture and Buddhist doctrine. While for Tibetans the Buddha form is both a cultural and religious identifier, the *maṇḍala*,¹⁴⁹ which devolved from the esoteric Tantric movement, represents the Tibetan and Buddhism cosmos and worldview. Tantric art involves a large and complex iconography, however this chapter is devoted to the *maṇḍala*. I will describe traditional meanings of Tibetan *maṇḍala* iconography and consider how the contemporary Tibetan artists utilise and rejuvenate this visual language in their own versions of the *maṇḍala*.

In her monograph on Gonkar Gyatso, Nathalie Gyatso proposes that the figure of the *maṇḍala* is emblematic of the crossroads of the West and Tibet.¹⁵⁰ In the catalogue for a contemporary Tibetan art exhibition at Plum Blossoms Gallery in Hong Kong in 2008, the director Stephen McGuiness said, “*Mandalas* are familiar to many people as colourful ‘new age’ circular shaped artworks occurring in both spiritual and secular encounters.”¹⁵¹ Yet, according to tradition, the *maṇḍala* has never been a subject of profane art.¹⁵² That is, until now. As McGuiness states, “*Mandalas* can be said to have become representative of and a symbol of ancient Tibetan culture.”¹⁵³

The traditional *maṇḍala* forms part of the religious phenomenon of Tantra named after the texts, Tantras, which were written in India about a thousand years after the

¹⁴⁹ The Sanskrit word *maṇḍala* literally means ‘circle’ (Amy Heller, *Tibetan Art* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1999), 225).

¹⁵⁰ Nathalie Gyatso. *Gonkar Gyatso, La peinture tibétaine en quête de sa propre modernité* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005), 98.

¹⁵¹ Stephen McGuiness, “Foreword, Fragile Mandala.” In *Nortse – Tsering Nyandak: Fragile Mandala*, exhibition catalogue (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Gallery, 2008).

¹⁵² Tucci. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, 271.

¹⁵³ McGuiness, “Foreword, Fragile Mandala,” 2008.

historical Buddha. As Indian Buddhism was systematically adopted in Tibet, the Tantras came to form part of the Tibetan Buddhist canon.¹⁵⁴ Many Tantras devoted whole chapters to painting and *maṇḍalas*,¹⁵⁵ such as the *Hevajra Tantra* whose written form dates from the eighth or ninth century¹⁵⁶ and the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, popular in India during the late tenth to early thirteenth centuries.¹⁵⁷ The tradition of worship of the divinities, mystical utterances, and yogic practices which became Tantricism¹⁵⁸ gave rise to a vast oeuvre of imagery and art works that are characteristic of Tibetan Tantric art.

In Buddhist tradition, the *maṇḍala* demarcates a consecrated area and protects it from permeation of negative forces. The schema of the *maṇḍala* corresponds with more primitive shamanic systems in which the priest or magus marked out on the ground a sacred area inside which the sacred purity of the place was protected from spiritual pollution or forces that threatened the physical integrity of the one performing the ceremony. Inside the circle the shaman identified himself with the forces of the universe and invoked its power within himself.¹⁵⁹ However, a *maṇḍala* is more than a consecrated area that must be kept pure for ritual and liturgical end. It is, above all, a map of the cosmos. It is the essential plan of the universe in its process of emanation and re-absorption, both spatially and temporally.¹⁶⁰

The original purpose of the *maṇḍala* was to enable the crossing over from the plane of *saṃsāra*, the mundane world, to the plane of Buddha and *nirvāṇa*, the unconditioned state beyond the cycle of rebirth.¹⁶¹ The two planes are ‘superposed and

¹⁵⁴ David L. Snellgrove. *The Hevajra Tantra, A Critical Study: Part I, Introduction and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980 (1959)), 2.

¹⁵⁵ Tucci. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, 270.

¹⁵⁶ Snellgrove. *The Hevajra Tantra*, 10.

¹⁵⁷ David A. Grey. *The Cakrasaṃvara Tantra (The Discourse of Śrī Heruka) A Study and Annotated Translation* (New York: Columbia University Centre for Buddhist Studies and Tibet House, 2007), 3.

¹⁵⁸ T. N. Mishra. *Buddhist Tantra and Buddhist Art* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2000), 14.

¹⁵⁹ Giuseppe Tucci. *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 23–24.

¹⁶⁰ Tucci. *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, 23 and Tucci. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, 270.

¹⁶¹ Tucci. *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, 22.

interpenetrated'.¹⁶² The means to cross from one plane to the other is by a process of ritual initiation and purification; specifically, a progressive process of re-absorption and disappearance into the immediately preceding psychic state until the elimination of *māyā* (illusion) is realised.¹⁶³ The rediscovery of the interior reality takes place in the inner space which has been transformed into cosmic space. Transformation from the plane of *saṃsāra* to that of *nirvāṇa* occurs in successive phases – from the periphery to the centre, as does the plan of the *maṇḍala*, where the passage to the other plane takes place.¹⁶⁴

The deity's place is the centre of the *maṇḍala*. The deity is evoked or descends into the centre of the meditator's being or heart. The space within him is then changed into primordial space at the point of the origin of the universe. In this process the self and the deity synthesise, and the illusions of time and space, self and other disappear.¹⁶⁵ Symbolic of this final stage is the obliteration of the physical representation of the *maṇḍala* when the ceremony is over.¹⁶⁶

The instructions for preparation of the *maṇḍala* are prescribed in the Tantras.¹⁶⁷ The drawing of the *maṇḍala* is a sacred rite in which any error will result in a failure of the psychological conditions necessary for transformation.

¹⁶² Tucci. *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, 16.

¹⁶³ W.Y. Evans-Wentz (ed.) *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 6.

¹⁶⁴ Tucci. *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, 29.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 34.

¹⁶⁶ Tucci. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, 270.

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, Chapter II, 'The Proceedure of Wheel Worship':
Well-protecting oneself thus, ornamented with *mudrās* and *mantras*, draw the terrifying *maṇḍala* which bestows great power. Then, with a corpse thread, or one coloured with the great blood, lay out the terrifying *maṇḍala*, Heruka's supreme mansion. [It is of] a single cubit, four or eight, [with] four corners all around, bedecked with four doors, adorned with four arches... Place in the middle of that a lotus with petals and a fully-opened centre, endowed with filaments. Place in the centre of the lotus the hero who is the terror of Mahābhairava [Śrī Heruka], who is bright and brilliant... Then make the vases, without bases, black [in colour], and so forth. They are filled with pearls, gold, and jewels, and with coral, silver, and copper, and with all foods, with skull bowls placed upon them. Then wind their necks with thread, their tips adorned with blossoms. Place eight at the doors, well wound with pairs of cloths. The ninth central vase is wound with a pair of cloths, decorated with gold, silver, jewels, or pearls. One should scatter precious golden ornaments on the *maṇḍala*. (Verses 10-15).

(David A. Grey. *The Cakrasaṃvara Tantra (The Discourse of Śrī Heruka), A Study and Annotated Translation*. (New York: Columbia University Centre for Buddhist Studies and Tibet House, 2007).



Figure 25. *Kapaladhara Hevajra Mandala*, Central Tibet, 1st half 16th century, *thangka*, pigment on cotton. 41.9 x 34.9 cm. (Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation Collection)

A *maṇḍala* is drawn upon the ground in a purified and consecrated place. Powders or granules of five colours of symbolic significance are used to trace the complex pattern of lines and figures. Threads are coated with the coloured powders and laid out on the ground. They are then held taut above the surface and released, forming straight coloured lines as the process is repeated to form the schematic outlines of the *maṇḍala* designs.¹⁶⁸

The *maṇḍala* has been utilised by contemporary Tibetan artists in a number of ways removing it from its original ritual purpose. At *The Missing Peace* exhibition at the Rubin Museum in New York in 2007, Tenzing Rigdol created a sand *maṇḍala* on the floor of the gallery space (figs. 26, 27). The exhibition, for which artists were asked to respond to the inspiration of the Dalai Lama, was part of a travelling and virtual exhibition called *The Missing Peace Project*, bringing together eighty-eight artists from thirty countries to help shift the world's attention towards peace through art.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Tucci. *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, 37–38.

¹⁶⁹ The Missing Peace Project: www.tmpp.org



Figure 26 & Figure 27. *Sand maṇḍala*, Tenzing Rigdol, September 2007, coloured sand, (Rubin Museum of Art, New York)

Rigdol's sand *maṇḍala* combined traditional and non-traditional Tibetan art practices. Some elements of the creation of the work resembled the traditional ritual, such as the use of coloured sand to form the graphic design. Some of the graphic elements were also similar: the eventual image is divided into four triangles within squares and concentric circles. Certain of the decorative elements, such as the border patterns, clearly derive from Tibetan pictorial tradition of depicting fire and cloud. However, the spaces usually reserved for representations of the deities were replaced with secular symbols, such as the Olympic Rings that referred to the then upcoming Olympic Games in Beijing, and the train tracks which referenced to the China-Tibet railway. In the centre of the *maṇḍala*, rather than a deity, Rigdol placed a figure of a gun upon a lotus to represent the violence that afflicts the world (fig. 26).¹⁷⁰

After ten days of working to create the *maṇḍala*, the grand finale saw a group of Tibetan dancers in traditional costume singing and dancing over and around the *maṇḍala*, the movements of their feet obliterating the image of the *maṇḍala* (fig. 27). The work was

¹⁷⁰ Tenzing Rigdol, quoted in "Tenzing Rigdol's mandala. Particles of prayers" by Swapna Vora (Asianart.com, 11 June 2008) www.asianart.com/articles/vora/rigdol/index.html#1.

not intended as a religious ceremony but a piece of performance art with a philosophical rather than a religious meaning, albeit a meaning which derives from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and tantric practice. The image was not consecrated and the sand was not scattered in a sacred ritual but simply disposed of by the gallery staff. In the final reckoning, the philosophical thought behind the work is that of “letting go.”¹⁷¹ Rigdol says that the work is not destroyed by the dancers but merely takes another form. Essentially, this is a secular version of the Buddhist concept of impermanence, which is demonstrated by the destruction of the traditional *maṇḍala* in sacred ritual. While Rigdol typically explores traditional Buddhist iconography in his work, he considers his work to be secular rather than religious:

I have come to understand that the traditional work of art is rather a stage to explain Buddha’s thought. And after that I try to use the mere forms of the various deities as a stage to express my own personal thoughts; thoughts [about] contemporary issues, thoughts that deal with my limited world views of our current problems.... The stage then becomes a space for individual expression. So in my work I assume that the viewer confronts the work of art with his or her own cumulative experiences and turns into an art of meaning-making. I use the traditional iconographies, or visual grammartology [*sic*] of Tibetan traditional art to rather express my personal thoughts and feelings with utmost newness.¹⁷²

In this respect Rigdol’s re-staging of the *maṇḍala* differs from previous performances of the *maṇḍala* in Western art galleries which purported to re-create the original ritual. Such performances reinforced stereotypical images of Tibetan culture as never changing, symbolizing a spirituality that has been lost in the West. One of the earliest instances of this presentation of the *maṇḍala* as a quasi-shamanistic ritual in Western art galleries occurred in the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition in Paris in 1989

¹⁷¹ Tenzing Rigdol. quoted in “Tenzing Rigdol’s mandala. Particles of prayers” by Swapna Vora.

¹⁷² Tenzing Rigdol. *Reimagining the Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Traditions: A Conversation* (panel discussion, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 7 March 2014). (1:02:47). <http://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/lectures/reimagining-buddhist-traditions>.

which explored the idea of the artist as priest or magician. During the exhibition three Buddhist monks from Tibet and Nepal created a sand *maṇḍala* in the Grande Halle exhibition space. In the catalogue notes the artists explain that they do not have an equivalence in their culture for 'art'. For them art merges into the broader category of arts and crafts (*zorig*), which includes painting, sculpture, architecture, that is, all artisanal techniques.¹⁷³ The exhibition notes describe the sand *maṇḍala* as:

a very complex ritual [which] brings down the essence of the deity at the centre of the *mandala* ... Sand *mandalas* are generally not made in public but in temples. When the *mandala* is finally destroyed, the sand imbued with the divine, is poured into a river which disperses the beneficial benefits.¹⁷⁴

As alluded to in the catalogue notes, the creation of the *maṇḍala* was never meant to be a profane spectacle. However, in the context of the exhibition, the sacred Tibetan Buddhist ritual must have seemed something of an artistic magic trick.



Figure 28. Monks making a sand or powder *maṇḍala*. Drepung Monastery, Lhasa, 1937
Charles Suydam Cutting (The Newark Museum Archives)

In a similar vein, a performance of the sand *maṇḍala* ritual was staged at the *Wisdom and Compassion* exhibition of traditional Tibetan art in San Francisco in 1992. A

¹⁷³ Musée National d'art Moderne. *La Magiciens de la terre*. Edited by Jean-Hubert Martin (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989), 241.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

group of monks from the Dalai Lama's monastery created a sand *maṇḍala* in the courtyard of the museum. The exhibition was mounted in a design inspired by the *maṇḍala* which the director of the Museum said represented a paradise, a divine universe, the home of a god, and symbolised the divine nature in our own world.¹⁷⁵

Donald Lopez said in response to this exhibition that the traditional art works were “fetishized by the conceit that the work, through its acquisition and display, had been rescued from destruction so that a part of Tibet's unique and endangered cultural heritage could be preserved.”¹⁷⁶ In the museum the artwork was imagined to represent a lost time and place, in which mankind existed in harmony with nature, understanding the mysteries of the universe. This epitomises the idea of romantic primitivism developed by Roger Sandall where: “a suffocating religiosity now descends on public discussion... [in which it is claimed] that native culture possesses a ‘spirituality’ found nowhere else.”¹⁷⁷ This romantic primitivism, of which Rousseau was arguably the greatest champion, “consists of fantasies inside the heads of urban dwellers – delusions of a morally superior, Edenic world beyond the horizon – which are then projected onto primitive peoples themselves.”¹⁷⁸

Whether the intention is to bestow a blessing upon an exhibition, or to highlight the technical skills of the monk-artists, the act of the sand *maṇḍala* in the Western art gallery or museum renders it a work of performance art, despite the spiritual impulse. Audiences come and go, sampling the ritual as they do performance works (for the construction of a sand *maṇḍala* takes days or weeks).

¹⁷⁵ Rand Castile. “Message.” In *Wisdom and Compassion, The Sacred Art of Tibet*, Marilyn M. Rhie and Robert A.F. Thurman (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 9.

¹⁷⁶ Donald S. Lopez Jr. *Prisoners of Shangri-La; Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 137.

¹⁷⁷ Roger Sandall. *Culture Cult, Designer Tribalism and other essays* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001), 181.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, ix.



Figure 29, Figure 30, Figure 31, Figure 32. Tibetan Guyto monks, sand *maṇḍala* (Hobart, 2010 & 2011)

In contrast to this appropriation of the *maṇḍala* by Western art museums, its use by contemporary Tibetan artists such as Rigdol does not engender the illusion of an ideal culture that is fossilised and never changing. Rather, it presents Tibetan society culture as a living reality, complex and diverse, in a globalised world.

Apart from the sand *maṇḍala* at the Rubin Museum, Rigdol has also explored the *maṇḍala* on canvas in a number of iterations to explore his exilic existence in America. *Obama Mandala: Mandala of Hope* (fig. 33) was painted the year of Barack Obama's first election as President of the United States of America. In the centre of the *maṇḍala* where the deity would normally reside, Rigdol has placed the iconic image of Obama by artist Shepard Fairey in his campaign poster, which featured the word 'Hope'.

Rather than Obama being deified in this work, Rigdol is expressing his own world view and the mood of the time as presented in Obama's autobiographical work, *The audacity of hope: thoughts on reclaiming the American dream* (2006).

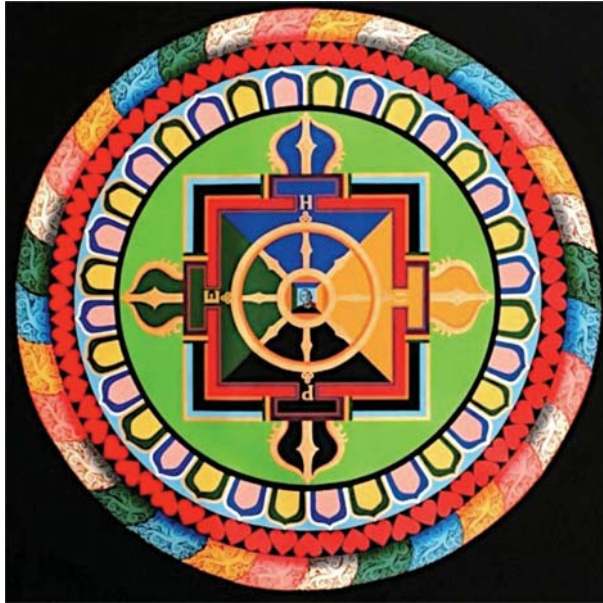


Figure 33. *Obama Mandala: Mandala of Hope*, 2008, Tenzing Rigdol, acrylic on canvas, 104 x 109 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

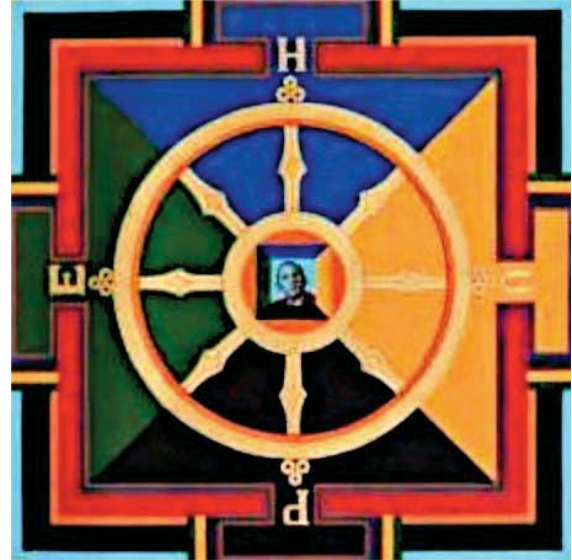


Figure 34. *Obama Mandala: Mandala of Hope* (detail)

In this work, Rigdol explores the metaphorical spaces of his hybrid culture by juxtaposing a popular image of Western political culture against a basic traditional *maṇḍala*. Thus Obama, who had quickly become an icon for the marginalised and minorities as well as mainstream liberals,¹⁷⁹ takes the central position. Here, Rigdol expresses his identification with a liberal and progressive brand of American political culture; an identification that allows him to feel included in American society and represented in politics, regardless of his ethnicity and cultural background, and without having to deny these parts of himself.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, he can celebrate his difference within the national diversity. The work represents a shift from the new immigrant's feeling of belonging neither here nor there, or being in "no man's land" as Gonkar Gyatso put it,¹⁸¹ to a sense of belonging to two different cultures at the same time.

¹⁷⁹ Joy-Ann Reid. *Fracture: Barack Obama, the Clintons and the racial divide* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

¹⁸⁰ During a speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama memorably said: "There is not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America – there's the United States of America." (Barack Obama. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. Melbourne, The Text Publishing Company, 2006, 213.)

¹⁸¹ Gonkar Gyatso. "No Man's Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet."

Another Tibetan contemporary artist who has explored his exilic existence and Tibetan heritage through art is Tashi Norbu, currently based near Amsterdam in the Netherlands. In *Adventure of My Life* (fig. 35) Norbu expresses visually his life's journey from a traditional Tibetan culture to the West. The work is dominated by the symbols of the Buddha form and the *maṇḍala*, as the two most ubiquitous cultural identifiers of Tibet and Tibetan religion. As Norbu says: "When you talk about Tibet ... you have the Buddha and then the *mandala* ..." ¹⁸²



Figure 35. *Adventure of My Life*, 2013, Tashi Norbu, Tibetan scriptures, magazines, acrylic enamel and oil paint on plywood, 120 x 240 cm (Mechak Centre for Contemporary Tibetan Art)

Norbu undertook his art training in both traditional Tibetan *thangka* painting in Dharamsala and Western art at Saint Lucas Art Academy in Ghent, Belgium. Being well schooled in both traditions, Norbu tries to combine the two. He experiments with ways of painting the Tibetan motifs that he has studied, and bringing them into the Western world, where he lives, and how he can communicate this in his work. ¹⁸³

Around the two central motifs of the Buddha and the *maṇḍala*, Norbu places other cultural expressions of his life and his art training in the East and the West. Around and

¹⁸² Tashi Norbu, *In-Between*, roundtable discussion, Rossi & Rossi, London, 3 November 2013.

<http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/exhibitions/in-between/video-x> 1:13:40

¹⁸³ Ibid.

over the two panels that make up the work, Norbu repeats the image of the fourteenth Dalai Lama's face. It appears to float over both East and West as if he is some omnipresent being. Indeed, the visage of the Dalai Lama probably completes the triumvirate of the preeminent symbols of Tibetan religion and culture.

Scattered in and around the Tibetan motifs are symbols of Norbu's Western life and identity. From his life as an art student in Belgium, Norbu includes snippets of the iconic Belgium comic book, *Tintin* by Hergé, in particular some scenes from *Tintin in Tibet*. At the top left of Norbu's painting we see Tintin in his mountain climbing gear climbing the Himalayas with his dog, Milou (Snowy), in his backpack. Then, to the right of the Buddha's head is another scene of Snowy tugging at the robe of a young novice Tibetan monk in order to get help to save Tintin.¹⁸⁴ The other Belgian comic book character in the work is Wiske (from *Wiske en Suske* by Willy Vandersteen) depicted just below the character of Tintin on the left. Wiske is shown dressed in white, and holding a full blown lotus that is the symbol of the Tibetan deity White Tārā. This image of Wiske is from the edition titled *Jewel in the Lotus* (1987), which was published in the Tibetan language. Both these comic book elements provide direct links between Tibetan and Western culture; two iconic comic books which were spawned in the West, both of which have story lines which reached into Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism.

Across the expanse of the panels of the work Norbu has collaged leaves of Tibetan scripture that he retrieved from *stūpas* outside the Dalai Lama's palace in Dharamsala.¹⁸⁵ These Tibetan texts are then overlaid with images and paint or cuttings from Dutch magazines. The work is thus revealed like a palimpsest in which we discern the layering of present experiences over faded pasts, or they are melded together

¹⁸⁴ Hergé, *Tintin au Tibet* (Tournai: Casterman, 1999), 46.

¹⁸⁵ Tashi Norbu, *In-Between*, roundtable discussion. (It is common for Tibetan scriptures to be burnt in *stupas* when they have deteriorated through use. Norbu likes to collect these whenever he goes back to Dharamsala. I also collected some pages of text from *stupas* at Sherabling Monastery in India).

augmenting realities and altering the landscape generation upon generation. This can be seen most effectively in the *maṇḍala* section of the work. Norbu combines both traditional Tibetan elements and techniques with Western art elements and techniques. Overlaying the Tibetan scripture texts, Norbu has depicted a *maṇḍala* which complies with tradition in a number of ways, such as the concentric outer rings and the square inner sanctum with four gates. The outer circle, which normally comprises a ring of flames, in this case contains some flames painted in the traditional Tibetan style but also newspaper cuttings and images from Western magazines.

In Norbu's work, the centre of the *maṇḍala* does not contain a deity but the text of the gleaned pages of scripture is revealed in what, at first, appears to be an empty space. Again departing from tradition, Norbu surrounds the centre with a circle of clouds and collaged magazine cuttings. For Norbu the clouds represent a veil to the mysteries contained within:

We, human beings, do not understand everything in our world. The clouds present us a veil behind which many 'secrets' are hidden. In fact, they are not tangible with our senses, but they may reveal through meditation and development of a higher Buddha nature.¹⁸⁶

While Norbu's work does not depict a traditional *maṇḍala*, his understanding of the mandala's purpose in pictorial representation is based on Tibetan Buddhist tradition:

A constructed mandala is a celestial residence of a meditation deity and every aspect of it has a deeper meaning. The doorways in all four directions represent the Four immeasurable Thoughts: love, compassion, joy and equanimity. The mandala also represents the universe, which is dependent on the exact ratio of the four elements (fire, water, earth and air). E.g. too much fire burns, too less makes it cold and the right amount make growing and flowering possible. This is both taught in Buddhism as well as in the Western science education.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Tashi Norbu. Facebook.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

The work comprises a collection of images from both Tibetan and Western cultures. In addition, Norbu combines traditional Tibetan and Western art techniques, from the traditional fire and water formations to the abstract paint-drip treatment. Like the category of *thangka* that portrays narratives from the Buddha's life, this autobiographical work illustrates episodes and memories from Norbu's life as an artist who has spanned cultures. Many of the vignettes exemplify the cross-over of cultures that the artist has encountered. For example, the person of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetans, has successfully crossed over into Western spiritual and humanitarian culture. He thus occupies a place in both the artist's worlds – the Tibetan world of his ancestry and culture, and his new world in the West. In the other direction, the popular culture characters of Tintin and Wiske & Suske have made forays into Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. The work represents the artist's transnational experiences in an increasingly globalised world where cultural flows move in both directions. While the work is grounded in Tibetan visual culture with the two dominant forms of the Buddha and the *maṇḍala*, the composition strays from that strict tradition and ultimately the images from both cultures mingle freely.

Neo-Tantra

Kesang Lamdark is a Tibetan contemporary artist living in the West who has taken the fusion of Tibetan iconography and Western methods and materials to an extreme. His Tibetan identity, religious heritage and political inferences remain strong currents in his art. Lamdark calls himself a Khampa Warrior,¹⁸⁸ a reference to his father's people from Kham in Eastern Tibet who are renowned for their fierce warrior-like character.¹⁸⁹ Lamdark belongs to the second generation of Tibetan exiles, born in India

¹⁸⁸ Kesang Lamdark. *Khampa Warrior – Neo-Tantric Art* [sic]. www.lamdardark.com

¹⁸⁹ See for e.g.: Shakya. *The Dragon in the Land of the Snows*, 173–4; Giuseppe Tucci. *Tibet, Land of Snows* (New York: Stein and Day, 1967), 143, 153.

after his parents fled in the early years of Chinese occupation. His father is a Rinpoche¹⁹⁰ and Abbott in a Tibetan monastery. Before Lamdark was one year old his family were accepted as political refugees in Switzerland. He was adopted by a Swiss family when he was four, and his father returned to Tibet to resume his position as Abbott. While Lamdark grew up in the West, he has journeyed to Tibet as an adult, in particular to his father's region. It is clear that his heritage and his father are very important influences on his work, although his knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism was gained through his adoptive Swiss father who is also a Buddhist and is the curator of Rikon Tibetan monastery in Switzerland.¹⁹¹ Regarding his Tibetan father, he says: "I have always seen my father as a spiritual warrior. My hope is to continue this fight through my art."¹⁹²



Figure 36. *O Tantric Mandala*, 2010, Kesang Lamdark, plexiglass, LED light and wood, 119.9 x 9.9 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

Lamdak refers to his work as Neo-Tantric art and he has a close personal connection to Tibet's esoteric religion. In Lamdark's *O Tantric Mandala* (2010) (fig. 36),

¹⁹⁰ Rinpoche: 'precious one' – an honorific title for high and reincarnated lamas in Tibet.

¹⁹¹ Kesang Lamdark. *In-Between*, roundtable discussion, Rossi & Rossi, London, 3 November 2013.

¹⁹² Kesang Lamdark. *Khampa Warrior - Neo-Tantric Art* [sic]. www.lamdak.com

the artist has constructed a contemporary *maṇḍala* from the modern materials of plexiglass, wood and LED light. The circular black plexiglass that forms the *maṇḍala* is etched with complex iconography arranged in a series of concentric circles. The symbols seem to float on the reflective black background as if suspended in the depths of a liquid pool or the far reaches of the universe, or indeed the inner universe of the mind. It emphasises the inner psychic aspect of the cosmos of the *maṇḍala*, the idea that the inner space of the mind is as infinite as the universe. The external space of the universe is but a metaphor for the corresponding space within, as is the physical space of the *maṇḍala*. While the initiate may stand in the centre of the physical *maṇḍala* in order to invoke the deity or the Buddha to achieve enlightenment, all the power and crossing of metaphysical planes occurs in the space within. When the work is read as representing inner space it is easier to conceive of the terrible symbols of skulls and graveyards that represent hindrances to enlightenment as being all in the mind.

With regard to Lamdark's symbology, he has combined traditional Tantric iconography with 'neo-Tantric' symbols of his own devising. At the very centre of the work lies a complete traditional *maṇḍala* in miniature with male and female deities in Tantric embrace. However, the artist departs from tradition, not only with the materials and the iconography, but with composition. Beyond the central *maṇḍala* is more freely floating pseudo-Tantric imagery. There are two cycles of terrible heads, ritual implements, skulls and monstrous chimeras. The skull is typical of the iconography of the *maṇḍala* and the terrific deities wear necklaces and crowns made of skulls.¹⁹³ They drink from cups made from skulls and use skulls as receptacles for paint and other substances. The skull represents the state of non-illusion. As in the *vanitas* art of the European Christian tradition, the skull represents the transience of mortal life and certainty of death.

¹⁹³ Bunce. *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 249.

Beyond these two cycles, suspended in the cosmos are ritual implements, Tantric yogis, human and animal figures and pornographic images, arranged in a way that is not seen in traditional Tibetan visual culture. Lamdark's cosmos is populated with various images of couples in sexual union, including a number of animal couples. These figures reference the Tantric union of male and female (*yab-yum*), however, they do not resemble typical Tantric imagery. Some appear to be depicted in poses taken from the fourth century Indian Tantric text, the *Kāma Sūtra*, which was intended as a study on one of the essential aspects of life and the art of living in a civilised world.¹⁹⁴ As we have seen, the deities in Tantric *maṇḍalas* are often surrounded by the goddesses and *ḍākinīs* (female spirit – sky-dancer) of their Tantra. However, in Lamdark's *maṇḍala*, floating around the central figures, are also images of the female form derived from modern pornography.

Lamdark's cosmos is very different from that depicted in a traditional *maṇḍala*. Yet ingredients of the Buddhist cosmos are there, such as the six *saṃsāric* realms of the heavenly beings, jealous gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings. According to Buddhist thought, the six realms are the states of rebirth according to the degree of merit achieved at the time of death. In hell, everything is repulsive and painful states of mind are constant. In a state that overlaps with humans, the hungry ghosts are constantly tormented by unsatisfied desires. The animals are governed only by their base sense needs and undergo suffering because of it.¹⁹⁵ The human realm is where further merit and wisdom can be gained which may in turn lead to a higher rebirth in one of the heavenly realms where divine beings are no longer subject to earthly desires.¹⁹⁶ In Lamdark's cosmos the fundamental states of desire are represented in the sexual act.

¹⁹⁴ Alain Daniélou. *The Complete Kāma Sūtra* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press 1994), 4.

¹⁹⁵ Donald W. Mitchell. *Buddhism, Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 44.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

In the catalogue essay for the *Generation Exile* exhibition, Clare Harris refers to Lamdark's commodification of the female body and the shock value of the work. She is of the opinion that Lamdark is: "specifically interested in engaging with the carnal and the crude."¹⁹⁷ However, the complexity of the iconography Lamdark employs belies this simplistic view. This work, where sexual imagery is juxtaposed with Tantric motifs and primordial or occult artefacts, suggests layers of meaning and insight into men's desires and fears. The floating images on black background evoke the inner universe, emphasising the idea that the realms of desire, suffering and *nirvāṇa* are in the mind. As Maxwell Heller notes, when viewed from certain angles the reflective medium of Lamdark's *maṇḍala* makes the surface "seem like lake water, strangely dark and impossibly smooth and [its] perfection communicating a sense of meditative calm," while at the same time reflecting the light and movement in the room.¹⁹⁸ Heller suggests that in this work "we can divine many messages about East and West, ancient and modern, tragedy and comedy, masculine and feminine, religion, art and commodity."¹⁹⁹ He finds Lamdark's approach to sexuality ambiguous, in that his work contains elements, which are both comical and sobering.²⁰⁰ He notes that "[f]or every measure of spiritual levity in his work, there is an equal amount of scepticism, materialistic obsession, hedonism, and pop-culture worship ..."²⁰¹

The imagery is alternately bizarre, hideous, sexual and sensuous. Like much of his work, *O Mandala Tantric*, divided opinion amongst Lamdark's audience, which we can see from the comments on the exhibition's interactive website. A very few were offended by the blatant sexual imagery. Most, however, were awed by the sublime and celestial

¹⁹⁷ Clare Harris. "Catalogue Essay." In *Generation Exile – Exploring New Tibetan Identities*, Palden Weinreb and Kesang Lamdark (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2011, 7–21), 16.

¹⁹⁸ Maxwell Heller. "Grave Sarcasm: The Work of Kesang Lamdark," in *Kesang Lamdark: Son of a Rimpoche* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2011, 5–16), 14.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5–7.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

effect of the work. The sexual representations were not mentioned except for one comment in which the viewer described the work as: "... the new spirituality, meditative for a specifically modern audience that is already so exposed to violence and nudity ...".²⁰² Indeed, so ubiquitous have sexual and pornographic images become in modern Western culture that one becomes inured of them.

Tantric practices involving sexual union are described in explicit detail in ancient texts such as the *Hevajra Tantra*.²⁰³ The purpose of these practices was to achieve spiritual liberation. However, if a religious group practiced these sexual rituals today, it would probably be considered in the West a bizarre and dangerous cult. Yet, sexual images have steadily entered mainstream Western culture over the last few decades so that pop culture now resembles soft-core pornography, so saturated has it become with sexual imagery and behaviour.²⁰⁴

This is indeed part of the culture that Lamdark finds himself being socialised by as a Tibetan exile growing up in the West, as he internalises the cultural norms and attitudes. In this work the lines are blurred as to what is moral or spiritual and what is immoral or amoral. Lamdark's neo-Tantric *maṇḍala*, with its mirrored surface, holds up this mirror to the Western hedonistic lifestyle where it is equally possible to shop online for both spiritual enlightenment and sexual gratification.

The *maṇḍala* in Lhasa

A number of artists in Lhasa also incorporate the *maṇḍala* in their work. As with the diaspora artists, the Lhasan artists often employ the *maṇḍala* as a keystone symbol of Tibetan culture and identity. As a representation of the Tibetan Buddhist cosmos, the

²⁰² *Tradition Transformed: Tibetan Artists Respond*. "What do you see transformed?" The Rubin Museum of Art, New York, 2010. <http://traditions.rma2.org/o-mandala-tantric>.

²⁰³ See for example: *The Concealed Essence of the Hevajra Tantra, With the Commentary Yogaratnamala*, translated by G.W. Farrow and I. Menon (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Pubs., 1992).

²⁰⁴ Gail Dines. *Pornland, How Porn has Hijacked our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), ix, 25, 26. And see Alan McKee *et al.* *The Porn Report* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 20.

maṇḍala is packed with signs of new influences as the Tibetan worldview changes. For the artists in the West, the focus is on how they negotiate their relationship with Western culture while for the artists in Lhasa, the concern is with the destruction of Tibetan culture as a result of the encroachment of external influences from China and the West.

As we saw in Chapter One, Gade's art practice often involves the replacement of ancient Tibetan iconography with icons and subjects from modern culture. Like Tenzing Rigdol, Gade's intention is to take religion out of the equation while continuing to draw from the Tibetan religious art tradition. However, as we have also seen, Gade, like other Lhasan artists, makes liberal use of references to the Cultural Revolution which is not common amongst the artists in exile in the West.



Figure 37. *The New Sutra: Wedding Ceremony*, 2007, Gade, mixed media on handmade Tibetan manuscript paper with burnt and distressed edges, 4 panels, 92 x 100 cm (total) (Plum Blossoms Gallery, Hong Kong)

In *Wedding Ceremony* (fig. 37) from *The New Sutra* series (2007), Gade follows the traditional pictorial and compositional rules of the Tibetan *maṇḍala* but also incorporates new profane figures and symbols, resulting in another form of hybrid artwork. In doing so, Gade uses the formal elements of a *maṇḍala* as a cultural, rather than a religious, object. In the catalogue for the exhibition *Mushroom Cloud* (Plum Blossoms Gallery, Hong Kong) the artist states that although he knows his work offends many Buddhist believers, he wanted to see what Tibetan painting would look like when it is detached from religion.²⁰⁵

Gade uses a reconstructed hand-made Tibetan paper based on traditional scriptures and fuses it with modern iconography. The paper is rubbed with charcoal, burnt at the edges and distressed, in order to give an appearance of antiquity.²⁰⁶ This technique and medium is then juxtaposed against the obviously modern imagery, resulting in a deliberate anachronism meant to challenge the normal perceptions and assumptions regarding Tibetan art and culture.

Superficially, the construction and composition of the *maṇḍala* follows tradition. However, Gade has replaced traditional iconography with his own symbols. The usual outer ring of fire that acts as a barrier to the inner sanctum and symbolises the fire that destroys ignorance is replaced by a ring of simple geometric border design. Similarly, the rings that normally contain the graveyard sequences and lotus petals are replaced by a circular assembly of Mickey Mouse icons in meditation posture as if they were little Buddhas. The Mickey-Buddhas are seated on lotus thrones with aureoles of light surrounding their heads.

Inside Gade's ring of Mickey-Buddhas is the square plan of the *maṇḍala* proper, the palace-city and dwelling place of the deity. Gade has set out the four walls and the

²⁰⁵ Gade. "Artist Statement." In *Mushroom Cloud* (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Gallery, 2008), 63.

²⁰⁶ Gade. Interview, Lhasa, 2010.

four gates of the directions, north, south, east and west. Whereas in traditional *maṇḍala* the gates of the palace are protected by the four guardian-deities of the four cardinal points, in this *maṇḍala* Gade uses the superhero-deity Spiderman (which we have seen in Chapter One) as the guardian of the gates. As Ian Findlay-Brown proposes, the depiction of these new iconic figures is intended to provoke the viewer into the realisation of the extent to which secular imagery has replaced the religious, and how much they are inadvertently deified by consumer culture.²⁰⁷

In the centre of Gade's *maṇḍala*, where the deity (or deities in Tantric union) would normally be, a wedding ceremony is depicted which combines Tibetan and Chinese traditions. The bride has Tibetan head-dress while the groom wears a Chinese robe. Gade's mother is Tibetan while his father is Chinese from Hunan province; it thus represents a personal narrative as well as a broader metaphor for the fusion of two cultures. In the main square, instead of sequences of the entourage of *ḍākinīs* or female deities, Gade makes strange interpretations of traditional folklore and Buddhist iconography. For example, above the wedding scene a Buddha figure is dressed in a Mao tunic and flanked by Tibetan yaks rather than the more traditional iconography of deer. In the south-west corner is a representation of the Chinese money tree, which is customarily present at weddings and represents good fortune and immortal life.²⁰⁸ In the south-east corner appears to be an idiosyncratic and secular version of the iconography of the multi-armed deity riding his animal *vāhana* (vehicle or mount upon which a deity sits or rides).

In place of the usual ornamentation of the traditional *maṇḍala* - the vases of flowers, the parasols and banners of cloth, jewels and necklaces of pearls, gold and coral, *cakra* wheels and thunderbolts (*vajra*; *dorjé*) - Gade has depicted the paraphernalia of modern life, such as safety-pins, torches, a light bulb, a cup, a toilet roll, a glove, as well

²⁰⁷ Ian Findlay-Brown. "Wandering Among Icons." In *Mushroom Cloud* exhibition catalogue (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Gallery, 2008), 10.

²⁰⁸ Stanley K. Abe. *Ordinary Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 33.

as more iconic references such as a can of soft drink called ‘Love’ written in the distinctive script and trademark colours of Coca-Cola. With the introduction into the work of these mundane objects and modern icons Gade wants to reflect the current cultural state of Tibet affected by the Cultural Revolution and globalisation and his concern for the dilution of Tibetan culture. Since his youth, Chinese and foreign influences have had an important impact on his thinking and the memories of his childhood. However, the strongest influences were Buddhism and Tibetan culture, and these continue to dominate Gade’s work in which he attempts “to talk about the realities of life as it is in Tibet”,²⁰⁹ a society and culture in transition. Gade believes it is important to find another way to depict a Tibet that exists in his own time, beyond stereotypes and in the context of economic changes, secularisation and globalisation. He says that every Tibetan is in the middle of a spiritual transition and religious transformation:²¹⁰

The culture is changing and it has been changing very quickly ... Tibetan culture has many other elements to it so it is not just the traditional. The traditional way of living is just part of this and it is vanishing. I feel that this is not within anyone’s control. Tibetans feel that they want the right of choice to live the way they want.²¹¹

Another Lhasan artist and one of the original members of the Sweet Tea House school is Nortse (Norbu Tsering). He is another artist whose researches have led him through an exploration of the truths and realities of Tibet in the modern and global eras. To this end Nortse incorporates the motif of the *maṇḍala* as well as other signs of traditional culture, recent history, and social or political commentary into his work. One of the focal points of Nortse’s art practice is the influence of the Cultural Revolution on Tibetan culture, pondering how the Tibetan people have managed to survive decades of

²⁰⁹ Ian Findlay-Brown. “Wandering Among Icons.” In *Mushroom Cloud*, exhibition catalogue (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Gallery, 2008), 9.

²¹⁰ Gade, Interview, Lhasa, 2010; and Gade “The whole story of Scorching Sun of Tibet,” in *Scorching Sun of Tibet*, exhibition catalogue, Songzhaung Art Centre (Beijing: 2010), 11.

²¹¹ Gade, Interview with Ian Findlay-Brown, July 2007.

violent social change, and how these changes have affected the innermost being of each individual.²¹² He says “[t]heir stories were part of the story of my own soul.”²¹³

Nortse took a long and winding road to arrive at this point. Having grown up in Lhasa during the Cultural Revolution he was selected to study art in Beijing, along with Gonkar Gyatso and four others, where he studied socialist realism. However, Nortse did not finish the course and subsequently went on to study art at Tibet University in Lhasa as well as in Universities in Guangzhou and Tianjin in search of a unique expression. Finding the art schools unsatisfying, he rejected the realist style which they propounded after encountering Western art in the 1980s.²¹⁴ Eventually, he concluded that even the formal vocabulary of Western art was not sufficient for addressing the spiritual crisis of contemporary Tibet, and that only through full participation in the present day realities of society and individual experience could one come to a thorough understanding of the actual situation of contemporary Tibetan art.²¹⁵

The two works, *Red Sun* and *Black Sun* (figs. 38, 39), represent a new direction for Nortse. Produced for the group exhibition at Rossi & Rossi Gallery in London, *Tibetan Encounters, Contemporary Meets Tradition*, the works were in response to traditional Tibetan icons.²¹⁶ For Nortse, the idea of the traditional Tibetan art works brought to mind the destruction of the Buddhist monasteries and Tibetan art and culture. Flowing from this, Nortse’s *Red Sun*, *Black Sun* works constitute modified *maṇḍalas* incorporating an ancient concept and traditional materials with new techniques and materials. Nortse produces a hybrid art form which evokes the ancient past in the present, and gives a profound socio-political commentary.

²¹² Nortse, “Statement.” In *Consciousness and Form: Contemporary Tibetan Art* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2007).

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Nortse, Interview, Lhasa, 2010.

²¹⁵ Nortse. “Statement.” In *Consciousness and Form: Contemporary Tibetan Art*.

²¹⁶ Fabio Rossi, *Tibetan Encounters, Contemporary Meets Tradition*, exhibition catalogue (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2007).

Figure 38. *Red Sun (Nyi ma mar po)*, 2006, Nortse, wood, Tibetan paper, *katag*, plastic tubes, acrylic paint, metal statue remains, 75 x 75 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)



Figure 39. *Black Sun (Nyi ma nag po)*, 2006, Nortse, wood, Tibetan paper, *katag*, plastic tubes, acrylic paint, broken light bulb and barley, 75 x 75 cm

This is another instance of work by a Lhasan artist that conceals its message in coded symbolic language. Nortse's symbolism is recondite, and the tactile aesthetic of the collaged materials conceals the psychic pain of the artist offered on behalf of his culture and society. The centrality of Tibetan identity in these works is inferred by the use of traditional Tibetan materials such as handmade Tibetan paper, barley seeds, ceremonial white scarves (*katag*), Buddha statuette and the motif of the *maṇḍala*: things that have been essential to Tibetan customs and culture. As Leigh Miller proposes, Nortse uses materials and Buddha figures to create connection to cultural and religious heritage and trauma.²¹⁷ But these works primarily concern the relationship to the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and its consequences for Tibetan culture and identity.

In *Red Sun*, the sun refers ironically to Chairman Mao, who was the 'Red Sun' in the hearts of all Chinese people.²¹⁸ At the centre of this work is a traditional bronze statue of the Buddha which takes its place as the deity at the centre of the cosmos and Tibetan

²¹⁷ Leigh Miller. *Contemporary Tibetan Art and Cultural Sustainability in Lhasa* (Doctoral thesis. Emory University, Atlanta, 2014), 345.

²¹⁸ Nortse & Benchung, conversation with author (Lhasa, October 2010).

worldview, after the pattern of a traditional *maṇḍala*. However, the statue, which was bought at the local market, is headless and broken, signifying the physical destruction of monasteries and artworks as well as the intangible damage done to Tibetan culture during that time. The red veins, made of plastic tubing, scattering blood in all directions, and the improvised tears surrounding the ruin of the Buddha, recall the loss of life as well as culture and damage to families and communities.

Black Sun also represents the violence and destruction of the period. The black colour in this work symbolises the loss of belief and despair experienced by the Tibetan people during this time. It denotes a dark and difficult time for Tibet, as if the sun has lost its light and colour.²¹⁹ The Buddha in the centre of this modified *maṇḍala* is fashioned from slivers of glass from a broken light bulb, so it speaks of light being shattered and being left in darkness. The deity at the centre of the world from which emanates the metaphysical light is rebuilt from fragments to emit a refracted luminosity. Barley seeds (the staple crop of the high Tibetan plateau) are scattered around the central Buddha representing both the seed of Tibetan culture and the divine essence or seed of the Buddha at the centre of the *maṇḍala* tradition. As the *maṇḍala* represents the Tibetan and Buddhist cosmos, the works signify the destruction of their whole world, physical and spiritual, during the dark period of the Cultural Revolution.

These coexistent themes of social commentary and spirituality are prevalent in much of Nortse's work. *The State of Imbalance* (fig. 40) is part of a series of self-portraits from 2008, which was conceived of as an attempt at another new mode of expression in paint on canvas. Nortse explains that his unfixed way of creating expresses his personal condition, that of "a type of imbalance, a lack of equilibrium."²²⁰ He goes on to say that in this "fluid ever-changing creative mode, I am throughout continuing or extending ...

²¹⁹ Nortse & Benchung, conversation with author (Lhasa, October 2010).

²²⁰ Nortse (Norbu Tsering), "Self-Portraits and my state of imbalance, my loss of equilibrium," in *Nortse, Self-Portraits – The State of Imbalance*, exhibition catalogue (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2008), 6.

my personal experience and recollections, clumsily piecing together the fragments of my spiritual inner life.”²²¹ The ‘I’ in his self-portraits expresses this state of imbalance and conflict between ancient and modern culture.²²²

In *The State of Imbalance* the artist stands in front of a *maṇḍala* which appears to glow against the infinite space of the universe. The structure of the *maṇḍala*, with its outer ring of fire and inner square plan of the sacred city with its four gates at the cardinal points, is clearly discernable. This version of the *maṇḍala* recalls Tucci’s explanation of the Tantric *maṇḍala* practice: “Man places in the centre of himself the recondite principle of life, the divine seed, the mysterious essence. He has the vague intuition of a light that burns within him and which spreads out and is diffused. In this light his whole personality is concentrated and it develops around that light.”²²³ Indeed there is a feeling that the diffused light on the canvas originates from an inner place of the man, the artist, at the centre of the *maṇḍala*.



Figure 40. *Mandala – The State of Unbalance*, 2008, Nortse, mixed media on canvas, 51 x 61.5 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

²²¹ Nortse. “Self-Portraits and my state of imbalance, my loss of equilibrium,” 6.

²²² Ibid., 7.

²²³ Tucci. *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, 26.

While the *maṇḍala* stands for symmetry and balance with the universe, the title of this work suggests the opposite: a loss of equilibrium, inner imbalance and confusion of identity caused by the conflict between traditional Tibetan culture and modern society in Lhasa where, in only a few decades, there have been sweeping changes in demographic makeup, commerce, communication, transport, architecture, fashion, food, education, language, and so on. The artist is wearing a traditional Tibetan shirt together with multiple neckties from Western culture (or modern business culture in general). He relates that it is not exceptional for people to be dressed this way in Lhasa,²²⁴ although he has taken it to extremes. This confusion of costume is a metaphor for the confusion of Tibetan identity in this modern era of Chinese occupation and globalisation, to the extent that Nortse sometimes feels that he and his compatriots are part of an on-going social experiment.²²⁵

In this coded language Nortse reveals his most personal truths. The use of the symbolic bandages around his head here points to the physical and psychic scars, wrought by the Cultural Revolution both on individual and collective Tibetan identity. Indeed, the motif of the bandages is an idiosyncratic symbol of the Cultural Revolution that Nortse uses frequently in his work.²²⁶ Against the omnipresence of the *maṇḍala*, the signifier of Tibet and its culture, the everyman struggles to regain the balance needed to enter into the state of harmony with the universe. In Nortse's work the spiritual truths are inextricably connected to the socio-political realities.

Nortse also tackles the realities of the inner world of the psyche, where the psychological wounds and scarring are no less felt than the physical ones. In *Release Life* (fig. 41) almost all the canvas is taken up by the *maṇḍala*. The effect is to bring the

²²⁴ Nortse. Conversation with author. Lhasa, October, 2010.

²²⁵ Nortse, "Self-Portraits and my state of imbalance, my loss of equilibrium," 6.

²²⁶ Ibid.; and conversation with author. Lhasa, October 2010.

presence of the *maṇḍala* into the viewer's personal space so that one can be virtually absorbed into it.



Figure 41. *Release Life* 2007, Nortse, mixed media on canvas, 135 x 135 cm
(Rossi & Rossi, London)

From what we understand of the inner workings of the *maṇḍala* outlined above, this rendition is more reminiscent of an antediluvian sand *maṇḍala* seen from above than a hanging *thangka* or mural. It resembles an ancient plan whose clear structure has been eroded over eons of time. We can discern the outer concentric rings which contain the square *maṇḍala* proper in the centre – the ideal city with its four gates at the cardinal points. However, against its black background, seen only at the corners of the work, the viewer senses the *maṇḍala* is actually suspended in infinite space.

As a map of the cosmos, Nortse's *maṇḍala* appears as the earth or the world set against the void. It recalls the famous blue marble photographs of the earth from space with their swirling patterns of cloud and cyclones hovering above the land. Nortse's *maṇḍala* pushes against the edges of the canvas. With its thin surrounding layer of atmosphere or nebulous light, it appears dynamic as if in the endless process of expanding

infinitely. This illusion is assisted by the bursting forth of butterflies from the essential place in the centre — the place of origination where the two planes of the mundane world and the Buddha can be traversed. These butterflies are modified *lung ta* (wind horse) from Tibetan folklore which symbolise the human spirit. According to Tibetan custom small pieces of paper inscribed with scripture are taken to the top of a mountain and released, or thrown up where the wind carries them to the sky. They can be likened to a blessing or a wish to assist in the realisation of one's hopes or dreams.²²⁷ Thus the butterfly–*lung ta* of Nortse's work represents the primordial essence of life and its beneficent aspiration, extending out across the universe. *Release Life* has the tenor of benign mystery. Nortse's *maṇḍala* finds the expression of the plan of the cosmos that, while drawing from tradition, crosses cultural boundaries by his synthesis of imagery, medium and technique from different eras and cultures.

The traditional practice and iconography of the *maṇḍala* is extremely complex. The contemporary Tibetan artists have deconstructed it in different ways using a variety of mediums, techniques and focuses. While the works are profane in the way of Western art, they draw from something very sacred in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of the *maṇḍala*. In this way, these artists renew the tradition of the *maṇḍala* in Tibetan art, creating multi-layered works that explore the metaphysical, the mundane and ultramundane, of the twenty-first century. In an atmosphere of cross-cultural fertilisation the new *maṇḍala* break down old rules of Tibetan visual culture for the purpose of a renewal of Tibetan art and a re-negotiation of Tibetan identity in a globalised world.

²²⁷ Nortse & Benchung. Conversation with author. Lhasa, October 2010.

Chapter 3. Tantra – Male and Female Principles

As we saw in Chapter Two, the centre of the Tibetan *maṇḍala* can be described as a sacred abode of the Buddhist deities. It is usually populated with images of the Buddhas or deities from the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, frequently various male and female deities engaged in Tantric union, or on their own. In this chapter, I continue to examine this Tantric aspect of Tibetan iconography, its treatment and interpretation by contemporary Tibetan artists and the consequent new significations of traditional iconography.

The Tibetan iconographic pantheon is vast and varied. It is populated not only with Buddhist figures such as *bodhisattvas*,²²⁸ *arhats*²²⁹ and venerated teachers, but also with gods and goddesses of Hindu origin that entered Tibet from India in the eleventh century,²³⁰ as well as deities and iconographic devices of indigenous origin.²³¹

The deities in Tibetan Tantric art have both a wrathful and peaceful aspect. The wrathful deities represent the fierce aspect of dissonant mental states while the peaceful forms represent the tranquil mind. The role of the wrathful deities is to defeat the enemies and obstacles to enlightenment, hence their terrifying appearance.

There are numerous examples of different figures from the Tibetan pantheon in the oeuvre of Tibetan contemporary art. However, in this chapter I will focus on a couple of iconographic examples that recur in the work of a number of the artists in both Lhasa and in the diaspora, these being the *yab-yum* (father-mother: male-female) in which a deity, in either its wrathful or tranquil aspect, is depicted in sexual union with his consort, and Tārā, who is one of the most popular female goddesses in Tibetan culture.

²²⁸ ‘Seeker of enlightenment’ – one who seeks enlightenment in order to deliver all beings from suffering. Mitchell, *Buddhism, Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 351.

²²⁹ ‘Worthy one’ – followers of the Buddha who have attained enlightenment (Ibid.)

²³⁰ For example, see Janet Gyatso “Image as Presence” in *Tibet Art* (The Newark Museum, New Jersey, Munich: Prestel, 1999), 210.

²³¹ For example, see Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 32-33.

Part I. *Yab-yum*



Figure 42. *Paramasukha Cakrasamvara yab-yum*, Central Tibet, second half 17th century to early 18th century, *thangka*, 139.7 x 68.5 cm (Rubin Museum of Art, New York)

In his review of the contemporary Tibetan art exhibition, *Tradition Transformed*, at the Rubin Museum in New York, art critic Ken Johnson lamented that the exhibition lacked the “sex and violence one normally associates with the traditional Tibetan artforms.”²³² Perhaps Johnson was thinking about the wrathful Tibetan deities of *yab-yum* iconography such as depicted in figure 42. This *thangka* depicts the Tantric archetype deity Buddha Saṃvara and his consort Vajravārāhī in sacred blissful union. Saṃvara stands in warrior pose and his open mouth bears fangs which grind up the false world, while his third eye sees the ultimate reality. His four faces are coloured blue, green, red and yellow symbolising four of the Buddha’s wisdoms. Vajravārāhī emulates his pose with her leg stretched up around his waist. He holds in his twelve hands various

²³² Ken Johnson. “Heady Intersections of Ancient and Modern - Art Review.” *The New York Times*, 19 August 2010.

implements symbolic of the triumph over ignorance and evil, including the flayed skin of the mad elephant of ignorance, a trident staff crowned with a severed head, an axe and a chopper, and a skull bowl filled with blood. She holds in her hands a *vajra* (diamond, thunderbolt) chopper and a skull bowl, symbolic implements for destroying ego. They wear long garlands of skulls or severed heads representing conquest and transformation of egotistic mental processes and they wear the five-skull diadems typical of wrathful or protector deities. They are surrounded by a circle of fire, representing enlightenment, and beneath their feet are the crushed bodies of mundane deities symbolising the conquest of even the most divine forms of egotism.²³³

A recital of the typical accoutrements of the wrathful deities sounds gruesome to a modern Western sensibility and it may appear to those unacquainted with the significance of Tantric symbology that Tibetan art is indeed full of sex and violence. However, Tantric art is esoteric and ritualistic and concerns complex philosophical and doctrinal concepts which are quite the opposite of vulgar sex and violence.

The contemporary Tibetan artists involved in the *Tradition Transformed* exhibition at the Rubin Museum, particularly Losang Gyatso (whose work will be discussed in this chapter) and Tenzing Rigdol, took umbrage at Johnson's review. Rigdol contended, for example, that Johnson "failed to understand the metaphorical allusions and the conceptual vocabularies" of the art²³⁴ pointing out that the figures in Tantric positions "are not sexual but spiritual; they are not about violence but about absolute compassion, ...",²³⁵

²³³ Rhie and Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion, The Sacred Art of Tibet*, 215-221; and *Worlds of Transformation, Tibetan Art of Wisdom and Compassion* (New York: Tibet House and Rubin Museum, 1999), 302-303.

²³⁴ Tenzing Rigdol. "Heady Intersection of an Alien and Tibetan Modern Art," Artist's Blogs, *Tradition Transformed*, Rubin Museum, New York, 24 August, 2010, <http://traditions.rma2.org/tenzing-rigdol>.

²³⁵ Ibid.

Rigdol also took exception to Johnson's opinion that, despite Tibet's political history in the second half of the twentieth century, the works did not directly deal with politics.²³⁶ This is evident in his work titled *Autonomy* (fig. 43) in 2011, in which he explores social and political issues using the *yab-yum* figure as his vehicle. The work became part of the artist's *Darkness into Beauty* exhibition in London in 2013.²³⁷ In this work he uses the *yab-yum* as a metaphor for the union or assimilation of Tibet into China and to comment on the adoption of the Genuine Autonomy policy by the Tibetan Government in Exile.²³⁸



Figure 43. *Autonomy*, 2011, Tenzing Rigdol, collage – silk brocade, scriptures, 200 x 200 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

The basic iconography of the seated *yab-yum* is immediately apparent. The deity and his consort are seated on a throne or solar disc with a vast and elaborate aureole representing the universe surrounding them made of ornate Chinese silk brocade. In

²³⁶ Rigdol "Heady Intersection of an Alien and Tibetan Modern Art," Artist's Blogs; and see Johnson, "Heady Intersections of Ancient and Modern - Art Review." (Rigdol, who is a published poet as well as a visual artist, suggested that Johnson's review was "Like a blind man writing a thesis on light").

²³⁷ Tenzing Rigdol. Interview with Clare Harris, *Darkness into Beauty* (video) (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2013) www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/exhibitions/darkness-into-beauty/video1#.

²³⁸ Dhondup Tashi Rekjong, "The New Face of Tibet," *Darkness into Beauty* exhibition catalogue (London: Rossi & Rossi, May 2013).

Tibetan Buddhist philosophy the two most important forces are wisdom and compassion. Both must be present for harmony to exist in the universe and for enlightenment to be possible. In visual culture, compassion is represented by the male and wisdom by the female, shown as the consort of the male. These two forces are related to the pre-Buddhist Indian concept of *Śiva* (male) and *Śakti* (female).²³⁹

In the composition of the standing *yab-yum* (*ālīdhāsana*) (fig. 42) the female figure has one or both of her legs wrapped around her partner.²⁴⁰ When *yab-yum* figures are seated (*vajrāsana*) as in Rigdol's work, they depict the peaceful, rather than the wrathful, aspects of the deities. The male deity sits on a throne in the meditation position or with one leg pendant outside the throne. His female partner sits facing him with her legs wrapped around his back.²⁴¹ The figures may be represented as regular human figures or with multiple arms and heads as in the *Guhyasamaja Manjuvajra yab-yum* *thangka* (fig. 44).



Figure 44. *Guhyasamaja Manjuvajra yab-yum*, Central regions or eastern Tibet, 16th to early 17th century, *thangka*, pigment on cotton, 76.8 x 58.4 cm (Rubin Museum of Art)

²³⁹ Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna. *The Tantric Way; Art, Science, Ritual* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 12–13; and Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 267.

²⁴⁰ Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography* 350.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Rigdol's *yab-yum* figures closely resemble the deities of the *Guhyasamaja Manjuvajra yab-yum* so it is worth looking briefly at the traditional symbolism. Each partner has three faces and six arms and sits in tantric sexual union. Their ornaments, jewelled crowns, necklaces, earrings, bracelets and anklets, symbolise attainment of the transcendent virtues of generosity, wisdom and compassion. They are swathed in silk brocades decorated with clouds and lotus flowers. Their symbolic implements include the wheel, lotus, jewel, sword and bell, symbolising the male and female aspects of reality-perfection wisdom.²⁴²

In Rigdol's work the male deity also has three faces and six arms and is comprised of Chinese bank notes bearing the portrait of Mao Tse-Tung. His female consort is crafted from notes of Tibetan currency, now an obsolete and historical artefact but still an indicator of self-identification and sovereignty. The background of the work is composed entirely of Tibetan scriptures, a familiar motif in Rigdol's work, which embodies Tibetan identity. As Rigdol expresses it:

The significance of scripture in my work has more to do with its distinct script. Though there are many different Tibetan dialects, there is only one unifying Tibetan script that binds all Tibetans together. So I consciously remove the landscape, whereby I remove the Chinese influence and replace it with our Tibetan scripture.²⁴³

Given that the official name of the Tibetan homeland within modern China is the Tibetan Autonomous Region, it would appear that the title of the work contains an element of irony. The issue appears to be achieving and maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between autonomy and unity; the condition of balance between shifting forces that is characteristic of living processes, a state of repose between antagonistic influences that counteract each other. The question is one of balance, a harmonious

²⁴² Rhie and Thurman, *Worlds of Transformation, Tibetan Art of Wisdom and Compassion*, 420.

²⁴³ Dhondup Tashi Rekjong, "The New Face of Tibet," *Darkness into Beauty* exhibition catalogue (London: Rossi & Rossi, May 2013).

adjustment of parts, or in this case, rights. Rigdol uses the *yab-yum*, whose essence is the perfect combination of wisdom and compassion, as a metaphor for the political status of Tibet within China.

Article 3 of the Chinese Constitution, adopted in 1954, provided that “The People’s Republic of China is a unitary multinational state. All the nationalities are equal ... Regional autonomy shall be exercised in areas entirely or largely inhabited by minority nationalities. Such autonomous areas are inalienable parts of the People’s Republic of China.”²⁴⁴ This has been a matter of dispute ever since. In 2008 the Tibetan Government in Exile published a Memorandum setting out their policy on the issue and calling for ‘genuine’ autonomy:

We remain firmly committed not to seek separation or independence. We are seeking a solution to the Tibetan problem through genuine autonomy, which is compatible with the principles on autonomy in the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The protection and development of the unique Tibetan identity in all its aspects serves the larger interest of humanity in general and those of the Tibetan and Chinese people in particular.²⁴⁵

In Rigdol’s work, China and Tibet are represented by the male and female deities. They are united in perfection of wisdom, yet each retains their own individual character as represented by the sovereign currency. It is an expression of the ideal situation, yet to be achieved, of the policy of the Tibetan Government in exile.

²⁴⁴ Shakya. *The Dragon in the Land of the Snows, A History of Modern Tibet since 1947*, 510. This article is now carried forward to Article 4 of the Constitution as amended in 2004: “Regional autonomy is practiced in areas where people of minority ethnic groups live in compact communities; in these areas organs of self-government are established to exercise the power of autonomy. All ethnic autonomous areas are integral parts of the People’s Republic of China.”

²⁴⁵ “The Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People,” delivered to the European Parliament in Brussels, December 2008. Department of Information and International Relations, Central Tibetan Administration of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Dharamsala, India.

Gonkar Gyatso also uses the *yab-yum* iconography to explore important socio-political questions. In his series, *The Minority Question* (2005) (fig. 45–47) Gyatso variously uses representations of *yab-yum* with both the normal number of arms and with multiple arms. While the basic pictorial device uses the *yab-yum* iconography, Gyatso departs from the traditional composition in order to articulate his enquiry. Unlike traditional *yab-yum* depictions, Gyatso's foundation is the historical Buddha figure, Śākyamuni, rather than an archetypal Tantric deity seated on the customary lotus throne. In *The Minority Question 1* (fig. 45), Gyatso has used the device of the iconometric grid, highlighting the ancient lineage of the Tibetan artistic tradition of representation of the Buddha form.

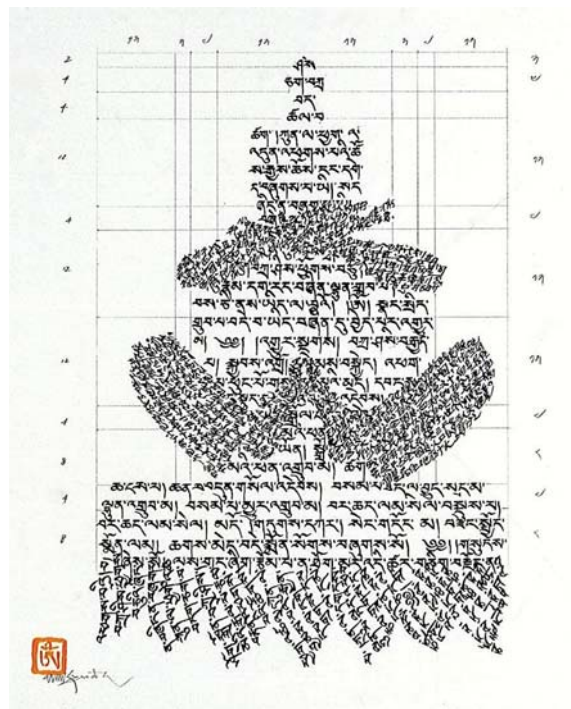


Figure 45. *The Minority Question 1*, 2005, Gonkar Gyatso, India ink & pencil on treated paper, 26 x 26 cm, (Griffith University Art Gallery, Brisbane)

In each work the Buddha figure is in silhouette formed from tightly laced calligraphy made up of segments of traditional Tibetan prayers and scriptures. Even in silhouette, the identifying characteristics are recognisable: the symmetrical body, slender waist, and legs in lotus meditation position, the head covered in tight curls and topknot.

Although the presence of the female consort, whose legs are wrapped around the Buddha form, suggests that the Buddha's back faces the viewer, it becomes apparent that the Buddha's silhouette is identical whether viewed from the back or the front. The figure formed out of words and script seems disembodied, signifying that the consort does not embrace an actual deity but a symbolic Buddha that represents a culture, an identity, an ideology and history. Thus the union can be seen as the embracing of, and union with, an idea and a philosophy.

Figure 46. *The Minority Question 3*, 2005

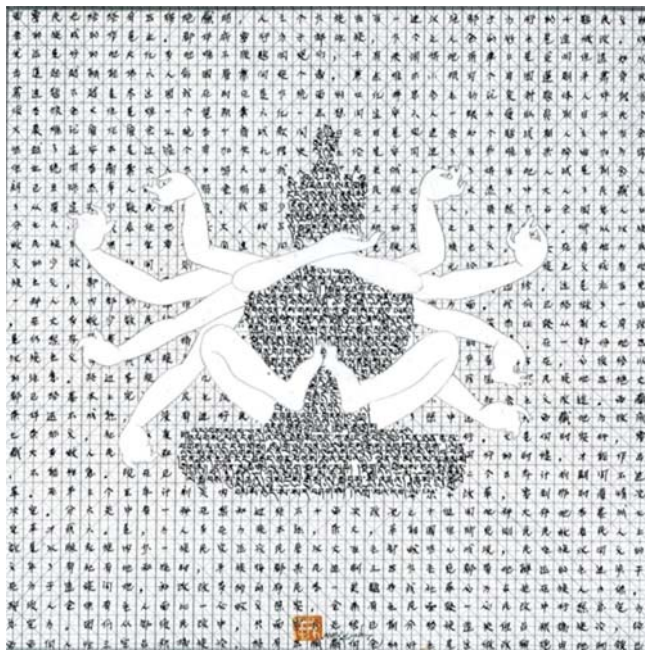
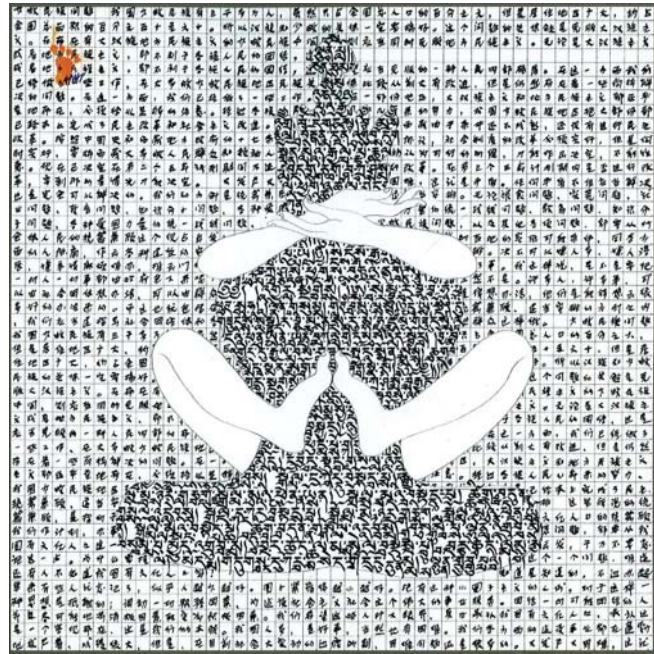


Figure 47. *The Minority Question 5*, 2005

Gonkar Gyatso, India ink & pencil on treated paper, 26 x 26 cm
(Griffith University Art Gallery, Brisbane)

Apart from the Tibetan calligraphy making up the Buddha form in each of the works, Gyatso also uses language script as a metaphoric and compositional device. As we saw in Chapter One, Gyatso has created a novel hybrid script using the Tibetan alphabet combined with Chinese characters. The backgrounds of *The Minority Question 3* and *5* (figs. 46 & 47) are filled with characters from this invented script. This invented language as a pictorial device provokes many questions with regard to the ‘minorities question’. It symbolises the complex situation of a multicultural or bicultural society. What happens when cultures mix or are forced to mix? To what extent does it result in a hybrid form? And to what extent does one culture become assimilated to the other dominant culture? What happens to the language of the assimilated culture? Do they cling, like the consort in these artworks, to the foundation and bulwark of their worldview, or do they embrace change and multiply?

The 2009 Report on the Human Rights Situation in Tibet states that the continued segregation in the education system and devaluation of the Tibetan language and culture has long-term consequences for the Tibetan ‘minority’. Further, on-going inequality and population displacement results in economic marginalisation as Tibetans are unable to compete against Chinese workers in a job market where their language skills, knowledge of Chinese work culture and government connections are inadequate for them to derive the full benefit from the development in Tibet.²⁴⁶ Lhasa and other population centres in Tibet are segregated into old Tibetan and new Chinese quarters; differences in customs and language mean that the two groups are unlikely to mix socially. The demographic makeup of Tibet is changing as more ethnic Chinese migrants settle in Tibet,²⁴⁷ with

²⁴⁶ Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD). *Human Rights Situation in Tibet, Annual Report 2009* (Dharamsala: TCHRD, 2010).

²⁴⁷ Shakya. *The Dragon in the Land of the Snows, A History of Modern Tibet since 1947*, 438.

Tibetans in some areas being forced out or reduced to a minority.²⁴⁸

As university students, Tibetans like Gonkar Gyatso, who were fortunate enough to gain entry into a university were steered towards one of the universities for nationalities, such as the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing, that were designated for students from the ethnic minorities in China. Tibetans are only one of fifty-six minority ethnic groups that make up the population of the modern Chinese State and all are supposedly guaranteed the same fundamental rights by the Chinese Constitution.²⁴⁹ So the question is not just about Tibet, but all minorities. Indeed, in a multicultural world, China is not the only country which contends with such situations. Gyatso has taken the traditional *yab-yum* and, while retaining elements of traditional Tibetan art and Buddhist philosophy, has adapted the iconography to reflect on the issue of minorities. Looking at these issues from the outside, in the West, Gyatso is now able to ponder these questions from a broader philosophical point of view.

Lhasa

A lot has changed since the diaspora artists or their parents went into exile. Their views of Tibet are informed by distant memories as well as Western media, the internet which provides a virtual Tibetan community for those in exile, and Dharamsala where the government-in-exile resides. If these artists have been to, or back to, Tibet it has been for short term restricted visits only. This relative remove from Tibet provides a space for the diaspora artists to think about issues philosophically or in terms of Western political thought.

For the artists in Lhasa, however, the changes that have occurred since Chinese occupation are interwoven into their lives and identities. Many of the main artists of the

²⁴⁸ Robbie Barnett. "Essay." In *The Tibetans*, by Steve Lehman (New York: Umbrage Editions, 1998, 178–196), 187.

²⁴⁹ "Constitution of the People's Republic of China." *The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China*. http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/node_2825.htm.

movement were born on the threshold of the new regime, in the early 1960s. (Of all the contemporary artists discussed, only Karma Phuntsok was born before 1959 and has a memory of Tibet before the Chinese invasion.) For the artists in Lhasa, their parents' memories of Tibet before the Chinese occupation would be harder to sustain in the face of everyday reality. But for those who went into exile, memories would be cleaved to as a keepsake, as their physical home is left behind. The artists in Lhasa have lived, if not side-by-side with the Chinese, with their ever-present existence and the massive permanent impact on their society. The artists in Lhasa therefore have grown up in a multi-racial, multi-cultural society, albeit an unequal one. Given that the presence of the Chinese in Lhasa is a permanent reality, the minority question for the artists in Lhasa is not just one of abstract human rights but one of pressing concern in their everyday lives. While the diaspora artists appear to intellectualise abstract concepts such as autonomy and minorities in the tenor of the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948),²⁵⁰ the Lhasan artists, tend to take a grass-roots approach to issues of immediate import, which is no less complex, using the *yab-yum* in their art practice to explore questions of social and political hybridity.

In *Raging Fire* (2010) (fig. 48), Gade presents a modern version of a Tantric *yab-yum* which nevertheless retains obvious traditional painting techniques and features of a fierce deity *maṇḍala* centrepiece, while at the same time removing it from a religious context. In this work, Gade transposes Cultural Revolution imagery for the traditional iconography. I first saw this work at the *Scorching Sun of Tibet* exhibition in Songzhuang Art Museum outside Beijing in 2010. Together with a number of other works from this exhibition, *Raging Fire* formed part of a solo exhibition at Peaceful Wind Gallery, Santa Fe, titled *Half Tibetan – Half Chinese*. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Gade's mother is

²⁵⁰ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948)
www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf.



Figure 48. *Raging Fire*, 2010, Gade, acrylic and natural pigments on cotton canvas, 100 cm diameter, (Songzhuang Art Museum, Beijing)

Tibetan while his father is Chinese. Gade believes that his joint heritage, which he calls a “contradictory condition,” is manifest in his work.²⁵¹

In Tibet "half Tibetan - half Chinese" is a special group. Tibetans think you are Chinese and Chinese think you are Tibetan. This fragment of time in Tibet is perhaps Tibet's most fierce age of cultural change and secularization. Divinity, nature and life itself have been alienated, faith transformed; a people once led by the spirit are now increasingly permeated with material desires ... During the present sensitive period, my "intermediate perspective" is perhaps relatively objective, but certainly isn't absolute. This is an extremely contradictory and complicated psychological state, at least when it comes to me.²⁵²

In Gade's *Raging Fire* the male and female deities are portrayed in a fierce and wrathful aspect as Red Guards from the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The couple in union

²⁵¹ Gade. *Half Tibetan – Half Chinese*, exhibition catalogue, Peaceful Wind Contemporary (Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2010).

²⁵² Ibid.

are standing in *ālīdhāsana* posture on a lotus throne and surrounded by an aureole of fire. The male deity has three terrible grimacing faces and many arms. He does not hold any traditional ritual implement but each of his hands forms a fist, a weapon in itself. He tramples bodies beneath his feet, as does Hevajra and other wrathful deities, representing not the destruction of ignorance or the worlds of desire and form, but the swathe of havoc and destruction left by the Red Guards across the country. The female consort embraces her partner with one leg wrapped around his back. Her face is also in fierce aspect and while her right hand is plunged behind her into the sacred fire, her left hand holds aloft triumphantly the Red Book of Mao Tse-Tung representing the new ideology of Communist China.

Plunging through the middle of the canvas is a monochrome fissure. It signals an ominous rift in the world portrayed as if caused by lightning or other cosmic force. In this sudden flash the faces of the Red Guards seem even more ghastly. The main figures are flanked on each side by the customary attendants. However, rather than being *bodhisattvas* holding their sacred symbols, Gade's attendants are two female red guards, one also holding a Red Book and the other wearing a gas mask, symbols of the new ideology and the destructive forces of the Red Guards. Both 'attendants' hold their hands in a combination of teaching and fearlessness *mudrās*, parodying the stance of *bodhisattva* figures in traditional painting. They are surrounded by comically monstrous alien creatures, or chimeras, as well as skulls, fish with frightening teeth and pieces of raw meat. In another humorous moment, a robed monk peers out from behind the attendant on the right, alluding to the religious origins of the *yab-yum* iconography.

The lotus throne and the aureole of fire are rendered in the traditional Tibetan style and the composition of the central deities and flanking attendants is also based on traditional Tantric painting, as are the bodies which are trodden under foot by the male

Red Guard. However, Gade departs from religious convention and removes the imagery into a secular context. Accordingly, the work is not simply iconoclastic because the gods are not actually mocked. Rather, Gade has composed the Cultural Revolution *yab-yum* completely removed from religion.

In this work Gade again shows us the images which have taken the place of the traditional Tibetan Buddhist deities, in this case the Chinese Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution reminding us of the ‘raging fire’ of the terror which occurred in that period, not only in Tibet but all over China, and the accompanying new ideology of liberation according to Chinese communism. The phrase in Chinese has long referred to the blaze of red flags carried into battle²⁵³ and is also a metaphor for sexual lust.²⁵⁴ Gade conflates these two subtle references within this work.

The work challenges the notion of ‘liberation’. On the one hand is the spiritual liberation and enlightenment symbolised in the union of the *yab-yum* deities representing wisdom and compassion. On the other hand is the ‘liberation’ of Tibet by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) from the foreign imperialists.²⁵⁵ Gade’s work also parodies the monumental style of the social realist aesthetic of the Cultural Revolution era, which glorified the deeds of workers, peasants and ordinary heroes of the people.

As we have already seen, for the contemporary artists working in Lhasa, the Cultural Revolution is significant to their collective consciousness and has played an important role in shaping their art language. Another Lhasan artist who utilises the *yab-yum* as well as imagery from the Cultural Revolution is Ang Sang, contemporary of Gonkar Gyatso and Nortse and one of the original members of the Sweet Tea House School in Lhasa in the 1980s. In his work, *Red Decade* (fig. 49), Ang Sang utilizes both

²⁵³ Cultural China. “*Ru Huo Ru Tu* (Like a Raging Fire).” *Cultural Fire – History*. 2007-2014. www.history-cultural-china.com/en/38History1199.html.

²⁵⁴ Amy Tan. *The Valley of Amazement* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 314.

²⁵⁵ Shakya. *The Dragon in the Land of the Snows, A History of Modern Tibet since 1947*, 37; Tsepon W.D. Shakabpa. *Tibet: A Political History* (New Delhi: Paljor publications, 2010), 410.

the iconography and philosophy of the Tibetan *yab-yum* as well as the Chinese concept of the *yin-yang* in order to construct a political and social allegory that resonates in some ways with Tenzing Rigdol's work *Autonomy*.



Figure 49. *The Red Decade*, 2008, Ang Sang, mixed media on cloth, 100 x 100 cm (approx..) (Rossi & Rossi, London)

There is symmetry in combining the two essences in this context as the *yin-yang* of traditional Chinese philosophy explains the true nature of the universe as a balance between two forces. The *yin* is seen as the negative or passive force in nature, embodied in the female and the phenomena of darkness, coolness, the earth and the moon, while the *yang* is the positive force embodied in the male, light, warmth and the sun. Almost all of nature, including humankind, comprise a combination of both forces. The perfect state in the operation of the universe is when these two forces work in harmony.²⁵⁶

The *yin-yang* is a motif that Ang Sang returns to often in his work and was originally influenced by a traditional sculpture in which the two halves were painted

²⁵⁶ Lewis M. Hopfe and Mark R. Woodward. *Religions of the World* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 167; and Ninian Smart. *The World's Religions, Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 108.

different colours.²⁵⁷ He feels an affinity with the idea that all phenomena, animate and inanimate, contain these elements. It is the resulting contrast and ambiguity that Ang sees translated in everything crossing cultural boundaries.²⁵⁸

The main iconographic device of the work is the *yab-yum* in the seated *vajrāsana* pose, which traditionally denotes the peaceful rather than the wrathful aspects of the deities. However, in this depiction the deities display twin (or *yin-yang*) sides to their nature. The many-armed male deity of Ang's work is not only in union with his counterpart female consort, but he is also made up of two parts, left and right. The left side of the face bears the characteristics of the Tibetan deity, such as the crown, elongated ears, and earring which is worn to signify deafness to evil words.²⁵⁹

The right side of his face wears a Chinese Red Army cap, also a symbol of the Cultural Revolution. In his left hands he holds traditional Tibetan ritual objects: the prayer wheel which contains written notes containing prayers or *mantras*; the *akshamala* or Tibetan rosary denoting cyclic time;²⁶⁰ and the Tantric axe wielded by protective deities and used to subdue the enemies of religion.²⁶¹ He also holds a flame representing one of the five Buddhist elements of the universe in the form of a fire stick, which is associated with procreation in Indian Tantric tradition.²⁶² These cultural and religious symbols signify the Tibetan essence of the figure. In his right hands the male deity holds symbols of Chinese culture and the Cultural Revolution: the little Red Book of Chairman Mao; a circular badge with the portrait of Mao; a Chinese calligraphy brush with red fibres like fire; and a sign with the Chinese Star and Chinese characters.

²⁵⁷ Ang Sang. Conversations with author, Lhasa. September and October 2010.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ *Hevajra Tantra*, Part II, Chapter vi, verse 3.

²⁶⁰ Bunce. *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 172.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 80.

²⁶² Ibid., 14.

In place of the traditional aureole of light which typically surrounds the head of the deities, there is the iconographic symbol of the “Red Sun of Mao” commonly depicted in the propaganda poster art of the decade of the Cultural Revolution from the 1960s. The positioning of this Mao portrait indicates that he is being given the place of honour of the *vajra*-holder or head deity. Except for a partial lotus throne in the lower left quarter, the Tantric couple are surrounded by a circular *mantra* in Nepalaksara script, which has been used since ancient times to transcribe scriptures.²⁶³ The circle is filled with Chinese characters. Thus, the languages of ancient Buddhist texts and modern Chinese society are juxtaposed.

A recurrent motif in Ang’s practice is the feature in the canvas which he rubs with Tibetan *mani* stone inscriptions during the preparation of the ground.²⁶⁴ These stones, which are characteristically Tibetan, are engraved with the widely popular *mantra* of Avalokiteśvara²⁶⁵ (*Oṃ mani padme hum*) and are left in certain places by pilgrims and travellers after making their invocation to the deity who protects them from danger.²⁶⁶ The result is a rubbing or transfer of the *mantra* onto Ang’s canvases before he begins the painting. This can be seen most clearly at the four corners of the canvas outside the *maṇḍala* circle. It is another way the artist grounds his work in his Tibetan identity and cultural heritage.

Like Gade and other Lhasan artists, Ang Sang uses visual language from the Cultural Revolution which had such a significant and on-going effect on the history of Tibet, its people and culture. Ang Sang questions the hybrid nature of people and culture in modern Tibet as a result of the assimilation into China, population displacement and erosion of language. The result, in real terms, for Tibetan society is a hybrid culture of

²⁶³ Ani Palmo, conversation with author, 2010.

²⁶⁴ Ang Sang, interview, Lhasa, 2010.

²⁶⁵ Avalokiteśvara (Sanskrit), (Tibetan: Chenresig). The Bodhisattva of Compassion, patron of Tibet. The Dalai Lama is said to be his manifestation (Mitchell. *Buddhism, Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 123).

²⁶⁶ Tucci. *Tibet, Land of Snows*, 155, 159.

Chinese and Tibetan, Buddhist and Communist, with two languages vying with each other - Chinese being the main language of education, politics and commerce and Tibetan being the language of traditional culture and religion. Where Tibetans may wish to carry on their own traditions, in public life they are everywhere faced with Chinese influence. For Tibetans born during the Cultural Revolution or later, there is no memory of a purely Tibetan culture prior to the Chinese occupation; that is lost to the annals of history and they were born into an already hybrid society. For the Chinese population in Tibet, they are likewise surrounded by examples of traditional Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism. Thus it may be said that modern culture in Tibet is neither one nor the other, or is both. In the words of Chinese President Hu, it is a society with “Chinese characteristics and Tibetan features.”²⁶⁷

The marriage of equals depicted in Ang Sang’s work represents an ideal situation which may not translate in everyday reality, but one which is strived for. However, unlike Gyatso’s *Minority Question* series, Ang Sang’s *Red Decade* is somehow disconcerting. In Gyatso’s works the *yab-yum* figures appear to be in union, yet the title of the works, *Minority Question*, suggest something as yet unresolved and un-harmonious. This tension between the image and the title reflects the rift between the socio-political reality of Tibet and the ideal. On the other hand, Ang’s *Red Decade*, which refers to the decade of the Cultural Revolution, suggests a social harmony that is contrary to our understanding of that period. As we have seen, the artists in exile are free to question issues regarding the socio-political situation in Tibet with impunity. Whereas, the artists in Lhasa need to be more circumspect with regard to the images they produce, at least ostensibly. As a consequence the artists in Lhasa are more likely to self-censor and produce works that do not cross the line, or use complex symbolism as a coded visual language.

²⁶⁷ Xinhua (Official State news agency). “President Hu stresses stability in Tibet.” (*China Daily*. 9 March 2009) http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-03/09/content_7557101.htm.

Part II. Goddess – Tārā

While the female principle features prominently in *yab-yum* imagery as a counterweight to that of the male, there are also female deities who are important in their own right in Tibetan Buddhist iconography. In this part I explore the feminine in Tibetan art and its interpretations in the context of the contemporary art movement focusing on the popular figure of Tārā (or Dölma in Tibetan).

Iconographically and anthropologically, the female figure symbolises love and compassion as well as wisdom. She can be a defender and protector, primordial mother who is creation and whose love knows no bounds, mother earth. The archetypal female is common to human culture and the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon has a number of important ‘goddesses’, both fierce and peaceful, who are loved and worshipped in their own right.²⁶⁸ They are derived from a number of Hindu Śaivite goddesses and are subject to the same iconometric rules as other Buddhist deities.

Most popular of all female deities of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon is Tārā. According to Miranda Shaw, the earliest definitive evidence of Tārā is from the seventh century, in which she appears as an attendant and emissary of Avalokiteśvara, the *bodhisattva* of compassion, in both literary and artistic sources in India.²⁶⁹ The greater emphasis on the cult of Tārā, as Tucci points out, is coetaneous with the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet from the ninth century.²⁷⁰

There are many versions of legends of Tārā’s origin. According to one version, Avalokiteśvara was looking down from his heaven at the world of suffering and he wept at his inability to save all beings from their pain. The goddess Tārā was born from his

²⁶⁸ Although the concept of a divine female figure or goddess may be thought universal, the Theravāda branch of Buddhism never adopted feminine deities (Alice Getty. *The gods of northern Buddhism, Their history, iconography and progressive evolution through the Northern Buddhist countries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), 105). So we will not find depictions of Tārā in the Theravādan societies such as in Thailand or Burma (Jeannine Auboyer, et al. *Forms and Styles, Asia*. Fribourg: Evergreen, 1978).

²⁶⁹ Miranda Shaw. *Buddhist Goddesses of India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2007), 314.

²⁷⁰ Tucci. *The Religions of Tibet*, 22.

tears, or from a lotus floating in one of his tears. In some versions of the legend, two Tārās were born from his tears, a serene white Tārā from his right eye, and a dynamic Green Tārā from his left.²⁷¹ Yet another version of the legend tells that the tear from the eye of Avalokiteśvara fell onto a valley and formed a lake and from the waters of the lake arose a lotus-flower, which, opening its petals, disclosed the pure goddess Tārā.²⁷² This last version of the legend brings to mind the iconography of other famous goddesses, such as Boticelli's *Venus*; born of sea foam, mother of the Roman people, goddess of love and other feminine virtues; a neo-platonic Madonna.²⁷³ Indeed, there are elements of universality with regard to female goddesses, such as the embodiment of creation, and the virtues of goodness, purity and motherhood.

Alice Getty suggests that the popularity of Tārā may be due to the fact that the faithful may appeal to her directly without the intercession of the lamas, which is not the case with the other deities.²⁷⁴ This aspect recalls the most revered female figure of the Christian religion, Mary the Mother of Jesus, whom the Catholic Church worships as the glorious intermediary and intercessor. She is the mother of God, gentle, utmost in tenderness and of limitless loving-kindness.²⁷⁵ Likewise, Tārā is considered the “mother of all Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*.”²⁷⁶ Her name is derived from the Sanskrit root ‘*tar*’ (to cross). So it is said that Tārā helps believers to cross the Ocean of Existence.²⁷⁷

While other Buddhist deities can have several iconographic manifestations, Tārā has a seemingly endless number of emanations, which expresses “the boundless facets of

²⁷¹ Meher McArthur. *Reading Buddhist Art, An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs & Symbols* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 47.

²⁷² Getty, *The gods of northern Buddhism*, 105.

²⁷³ H.W. Janson; *A History of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962), 345.

²⁷⁴ Getty. *The gods of northern Buddhism*, 105.

²⁷⁵ “Octobri Mense; Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on the Rosary.” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 1891. www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_22091891_octobri-mense_en.html.)

²⁷⁶ Getty, *The gods of northern Buddhism*, 105.

²⁷⁷ The Tibetan translation of Tārā, *döl-ma*, means ‘saviouress’ or ‘deliveress’ (Ibid.,105).

her nature” and testifies to her immense popularity.²⁷⁸ The text *Twenty-one Praises of Tārā*, in which each verse praises a different aspect of Tārā, became the most popular of all prayers to Tārā in Tibet.²⁷⁹

Although her most popular iconographic depictions are the peaceful Green and White Tārās, other fierce Tantric forms are also known. White Tārā’s symbol, the full-bloom white lotus (*padma*), which opens by day and closes by night, represents day. Green Tārā’s motif, the *utpala*, or blue lotus, with the petals closed, is associated with the moon and represents night.²⁸⁰ But Tārā may also carry other symbols of her attributes and powers, such as a jewel, vase, vial, sword, arrow, bow, wheel, staff, skull of blood, noose, prayer beads (*mālā*), and book.

The contemporary Tibetan artists engage with the iconography of Tārā in a number of ways. Whereas traditional iconography usually depicts Tārā in a composite group with her many emanations surrounding a central Tārā, the contemporary artists generally depict a single figure of the female goddess. They apply the most characteristic features of Tārā, but take these in new directions, employing modern techniques and materials often resulting in a kind of fusion of Tārā which never entirely conforms to traditional iconography but nevertheless remains, explicitly or implicitly, Tārā.

For the *Tradition Transformed* exhibition at the Rubin Museum in New York in 2010, American based artist, Losang Gyatso, created a digital photographic work titled *Clear Light Tārā* (fig. 50), which depicts White Tārā surrounded by other Buddhist deities. Gyatso took his inspiration from a White Tārā *thangka* (fig. 51), which was one of the first pieces acquired by the founders of the Museum.

²⁷⁸ Miranda Shaw. *Buddhist Goddesses of India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2007), 336.

²⁷⁹ Martin Wilson. *In Praise of Tārā, Songs to the Saviouress: Source Texts from India and Tibet on Buddhism's Great Goddess* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1992), 107.

²⁸⁰ Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 321; Getty, *The gods of northern Buddhism*, 106.



Figure 50. *Clear Light Tārā*, 2009, Losang Gyatso, digital photograph, 91.4 x 76.2 cm (courtesy of the artist)



Figure 51. *White Tārā thangka*, Tibet, 19th century, pigments on cloth, 74.9 x 54.1 cm (Rubin Museum of Art)

White Tārā (*Sitatārā*) is one of the most serene forms of the female deity and represents perfect purity, transcendent knowledge and wisdom. She is the consort of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara and is represented at his right hand, generally standing in a lyrical swaying pose. However, most usually she is depicted, in both painting and sculpture, seated in the cross-legged posture, the soles of the feet turned upward. She wears the garments and ornaments as a *bodhisattva*, and her hair is abundant and wavy. Her right hand is in ‘wish-granting’ *mudrā*. With her left hand, which is in ‘explanation’ *mudrā*, she holds the stem of a full-blown lotus.²⁸¹ She has the third eye of foreknowledge, and if there are eyes on the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet, she is

²⁸¹ Meher McArthur. *Reading Buddhist Art, An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs & Symbols* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 47.

called ‘Tārā of the Seven Eyes’. She is often surrounded by her multiple emanations or other deities as she is in this *thangka*.

Although Losang Gyatso’s work retains the essential traditional iconometry and composition of Tārā and surrounding deities of the original *thangka*, the emphasis in this work is on light and the luminous essence, which this Tārā embodies. Gyatso was born in Tibet but spent his childhood in Britain after his family went into exile. He later spent two years in India studying Tibetan painting before moving to the United States in 1974 where he studied at the Academy of Art in San Francisco.

With the assistance of modern digital technology Gyatso manipulates the image to produce a *bokeh* effect. He does not oppose the traditional iconography but abstracts from it and extracts light. He produces a luminescent work of iconic memory as if he has captured Tārā’s aura or essence. We can make out Tārā’s figure seated on a lotus throne against the sun and moon discs. She is surrounded by depictions of other aspects of herself and other deities who are also expressed as auras of light.

Losang Gyatso expressed the intentions behind this work in an interview for the *Tibet Art Now* exhibition in Amsterdam in 2009. He relates that up until the time of his own childhood Tibetan icon paintings were created for the practice of Buddhism. But since then there has been a profusion of Tibetan art, from both inside and outside Tibet, in tourist centres and factories in India, Nepal and even in the West, that has no other purpose than to be sold in shops as tourist souvenirs. In the process, so Gyatso says, the magic and presence of the essence of the deities depicted has been lost.²⁸² For this reason he experiments with creating deity paintings that try to restore some of that energy and power of the great paintings of the past. However, his paintings and art works are not for meditation or for religious practice, but rather “a personal kind of experiment in seeing if,

²⁸² Losang Gyatso, interview by Simonetta Ronconi (*Tibet Art Now*. Amsterdam: June 2009) <http://www.tibethouse.nl/tan/interview.htm>.

through painting, it creates an image of a deity and try [*sic*] and express a little bit of the space of that particular deity through colour and form.”²⁸³ In effect, Gyatso is trying to renew a Tibetan artistic tradition that has lost its metaphysical power through overproduction. This is reiterated in the artist’s blog for the *Tradition Transformed* exhibition, where he explains his motivation:

My interest is in trying to locate the threads between past and present, and exploring possible conceptual spaces in the future that can accommodate some of the core. Once these bearings are recovered and soundings appreciated, I think we have the freedom to go wherever and change however much we want without losing our way.²⁸⁴

Losang Gaytso’s second purpose was to produce a more universal Tārā image which transcends the cultural and ethnic elements of traditional costume and adornments, the image and idea of the landscape of Tibet, and the environment of the monastery. By utilising technology to digitally manipulate the *thangka* image, Gyatso goes beyond the hand of the original artist to create an image which produces an ‘auratic’ effect not just for Tibetans who understand the traditional symbol but also for non-Tibetans.²⁸⁵ He says:

I was interested in what a Tibetan *thangka* looked and felt like to a non-Tibetan who doesn’t view it through a complex Tibetan socio-cultural prism, and who brings their own experience of viewing art. This led me to strip away as much culturally-specific information and form as possible, and to reduce the White Tārā *thangka* to as pure a universal manifestation as possible.²⁸⁶

The concept of ‘clear light’ is derived from the Buddhist texts. In Tibetan Tantric Buddhism ‘Clear Light’ (*ösel*) is the mind’s natural state of clarity.²⁸⁷ It is the very

²⁸³ Losang Gyatso, interview by Simonetta Ronconi.

²⁸⁴ Losang Gyatso, “Tradition Transformed - Artists Blogs.” *Tradition Transformed: Tibetan Artists Respond* (Rubin Museum of Art, 13 September 2010. http://traditions.rma2.org/losang_gyatso).

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Losang Gyatso, quoted in Michael Sheehy, “Transforming Tradition: Tibetan Artists on the Dialectic of Sanctity and Modernity.” In *Tradition Transformed: Tibetan Artists Respond*, 19–33 (New York: Art Asia Pacific, Rubin Museum of Art, 2010), 23.

²⁸⁷ Thubten Yeshe (Lama). *Introduction to Tantra*. Edited by Jonathan Landaw (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 77.

subtlest state of mind achieved during the highest Tantric yoga or during death.²⁸⁸

According to Tantra, the true nature of the mind is essentially pure. However, the clear light nature of mind is clouded by afflictive emotions and thoughts. But through meditative practices the mind can be freed to express its true essence.²⁸⁹ In Tantric Buddhist practice, to contemplate the nature of the meditational deity is to dissolve its appearance into light, and to absorb it. Thus, one's mind becomes inseparable from the mind of the deity. Gyatso has manipulated a traditional *thangka* image to express the 'Clear Light' mind in the external form of an aura or observable light that appears to emanate from Tārā and the other deities.

Another artist who explores the qualities of light in relation to Tārā is Kesang Lamdark, an artist who seems to go the furthest in pushing the boundaries of traditional iconography. A trace of underlying insurgency in his art practice may render his works iconoclastic to some. However, as we saw in Chapter Two, Lamdark takes seriously his conviction to 'neo-Tantric' art. He explores modern media techniques to synthesise traditional Tibetan Buddhist iconography with Western materials, techniques which he has brought to the creation of modern effigies of Tārā in sculptural form.

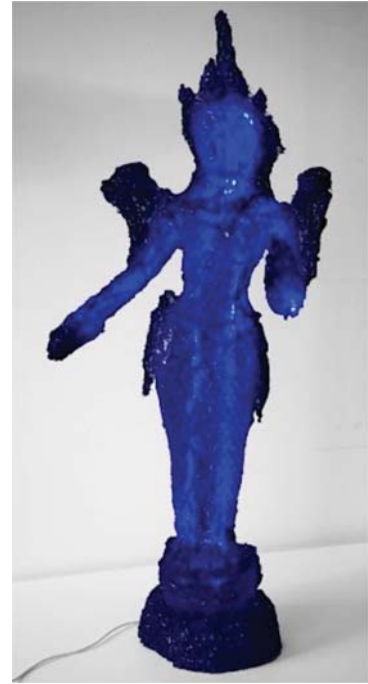
Lamdak's standing sculptures of *Pink* and *Blue Tārā* (2008) are made from chicken wire, melted plastic and neon light (figs. 52, 53). They measure about one and a half metres tall and so are, more or less, life size. The hot pink and electric blue plastic Tārās do not appear to have any relation to the Tārās of the ancient Tantras. The colours belong to the modern era, as does the synthetic medium. The plastic is melted over a chicken wire frame and forms the feminine figure of the Goddess Tārā in a surprisingly elegant pose considering the crude materials.

²⁸⁸ Thubten Yeshe, *Introduction to Tantra*, 144.

²⁸⁹ Tenzin Gyatso (Dalai Lama XIV). "The Buddhist Concept of Mind." In *Mind Science, An East-West Dialogue*, edited by Daniel Goleman and Robert A.F. Thurman, translated by Thubten Jinpa (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991, 11-18), 17.



Figure 52. Figure 53.
Pink Tārā, Blue Tārā, 2008,
 Kesang Lamdark,
 neon light, plastic, chicken wire,
 ht. 143 cm
 (Rossi & Rossi, London)



While the medium used by Lamdark obscures the features, it appears that intricacies of design are not as important as the abstract and intuitive impression of the goddess. Her stance is graceful not fierce, and she holds her hands in the *mudrās* of White and Green Tārā, the wish-granting and explanation gestures. Her ornaments are also discernable; her crown and the lotus flowers on her shoulders (see figs. 54, 55). Her body has beautiful feminine proportions and she wears a crown and costume with drapery and adornments on her shoulders. Lamdark's goddesses achieve a fluid and swaying stance with arms elegantly extended in a lyrical dancing gesture which recalls the *devī* (goddess) counterparts of Vedic sculpture (see fig. 56).



Figure 54. *White Tārā*, Tibet, 17th
 century, gilt bronze, ht. 54.5 cm
 (The Berti Aschmann Foundation of
 Tibetan Art, Museum Rietberg,
 Zurich)



Figure 55. *Green Tārā*, Tibet, 15th
 century, gilt copper, ht. 30 cm
 (Mr & Mrs L. Solomon, Paris)

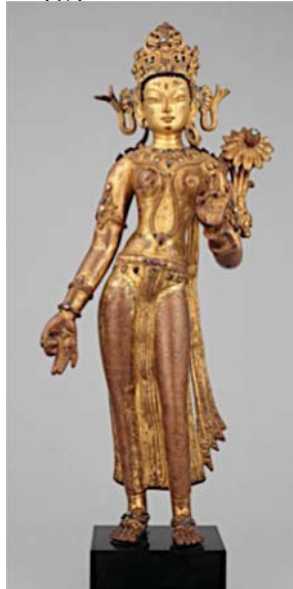


Figure 56. *Standing Tārā*, Nepal, 14th century, gilt copper alloy with colour, inlaid with semi-precious stones, ht. 59.1 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

In his review of the exhibition *Impermanence - Contemporary Tibetan Art*, art critic and Hong Kong Gallery owner, John Batten offered his view on the significance of the colours of Tārā:

A tara [*sic*] is a female Bodhisattva or Buddha, whose form - identified by its colour – can represent a Buddhist virtue: for example, a White Tara denotes compassion and serenity; a Yellow Tara is associated with wealth and prosperity. A pink-coloured tara is unknown in Tibetan iconography, but this garish version constructed with chicken wire covered in dripped plastic with inserted pink fluorescent lighting could be imagined to represent the less virtuous behaviour of paid sex.²⁹⁰

However, it may be a Western sensibility that Batten is expressing, for in places like India, for example, hot garish colours are extremely popular and not at all associated with cheapness or vulgarity. Ultimately, it is the incongruity that appeals to Lamdark. In the artist's words:

As an expatriate living abroad, I have developed a taste for many different cuisine's. [*sic*] When I am eating, I like to mix unusual things together: meat with chocolate, bananas with anchovies. As an artist, I combine unusual materials to create a taste for something different. Ultimately, my life and my work are about

²⁹⁰ John Batten. "Impermanence - Contemporary Tibetan Art," Rossi & Rossi, Wong Chuk Hang (AICAHK International Association of Art Critics Hong Kong, 18th August 2014). <http://www.aicahk.org/eng/reviews.asp?id=295>.

bringing together the unfamiliar. From Tibet to India to Switzerland to America; from hair to plexi to butter to nail polish, my unique background gives me a distinctive appetite.²⁹¹

Lamdak has created a number of sculptures using hot pink, including a 10,000-kilogram boulder, taken by truck from his father's hometown in Tibet to Shanghai, which he covered in pink plastic. In that work the boulder represented the Himalayas, the plastic represented the West and pink the colour of the artist.²⁹²

At first glance one may question whether Lamdark's sculptures are actually mocking parodies of traditional Tibetan religious artworks with their use of mundane materials such as plastic and chicken wire and their garish colours. However, he says it is the common things that make works of art precious. Essentially, Lamdark sees the medium of plastic as no different from stone or metal. Religious artworks are only made precious by the worshipper. The same can be said for Lamdark's works; the medium used is not important. "Otherwise" he says "its just a hunk of rock, metal or plastic."²⁹³ The idea behind this is a concept that is central to Tibetan Buddhism, the idea of the false appearance of things, that is, emptiness or *śūnyatā*. It is the mind, or convention, which imputes existence or meaning to an object, which is not inherent in the object itself.

In his catalogue essay for the *Tradition Transformed* exhibition, H.G. Masters suggests that while Lamdark's Tārā sculptures appear as "something kitschy" like illuminated flamingo lawn decorations,²⁹⁴ his work retains a respect for his heritage insofar as it can be seen to be reflecting on the transformation of sacred religious icons

²⁹¹ Kesang Lamdark, artist's statement, www.lamdak.com/popup_text/statement1.html.

²⁹² Kesang Lamdark, "Outdoor special project," *Pink Himalayan Boulder*, 2008. www.lamdak.com/shock.html.

²⁹³ Kesang Lamdark. "The World According to Kesang; Kesang Lamdark in conversation with Elaine W. Ng." In *Plastic Karma*, 6–9 (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2008), 9.

²⁹⁴ H.G. Masters. "Enlightenment Might Not Be Possible in This Lifetime: Strive for Your Own Liberation with Laughter and Diligence." In *Tradition Transformed: Tibetan Artists Respond* (New York: Art Asia Pacific, Rubin Museum of Art, 2010, 59–79), 71.

into cheap plastic sculptures.²⁹⁵ His Tārās parody the kitsch religious souvenirs obtainable, for example, outside the Vatican and other places of Christian pilgrimage, of Jesus or the Madonna whose red hearts pulse with battery operated lights. Even more so in the East, gaudy effigies of gods and goddesses with coloured lights can be found everywhere, adorning dashboards of cars and buses and household altars.

Lamdark pushes the boundaries of traditional iconography and iconometry to investigate what is essential and what is superfluous distraction. His Tārās, with their internal light sources, transform into modern versions of a Tantric meditational deity. These intuitive forms are without precise iconography and freed from traditional religious constraints, and in colours more associated with Yves Klein or pop culture than the traditional Green and White goddesses.

Tenzin Rigdol is another Tibetan artist in exile who has explored the modernisation of Tārā. In *Updating Green Tārā* (fig. 57) Rigdol depicts Tārā in the form of people's champion and political figurehead, Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy in Burma, and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.



Figure 57. *Updating Green Tārā*, 2010, Tenzin Rigdol, mixed media, 60 x 45 cm (Rubin Museum of Art)

²⁹⁵ H.G. Masters. "Enlightenment Might Not Be Possible in This Lifetime," 71–73.



Figure 58. *Green Tārā*, Tibet, 13th century, *thangka*, ink and colour on canvas, 52.4 x 43.2 cm (Cleveland Museum of Art)

In traditional iconography, Green Tārā (*Śyāmatārā*) (fig. 58) symbolises Divine Energy. She is represented seated on a lotus throne, the right leg pendant, with the foot supported by a small lotus, the stem of which is attached to the lotus-throne. It is said that her right leg is extended forward symbolising her readiness to leap into action to save others. She wears the ornaments of a *bodhisattva*, and usually the five-leaved crown. Her right hand is in ‘wish-granting’ *mudrā* and her left is in ‘explanation’ *mudrā* and holds the blue lotus. She may be represented alone or surrounded by numerous of her emanations.²⁹⁶

Rigdol’s collage process of using scriptures and refracted elements of design is immediately recognisable, and his *Green Tārā* is a fusion of classical iconography and modern art technique and style. Suu Kyi’s face, familiar from global newspaper and television coverage, is tinged green in the iconographic tradition of Green Tārā.

She is seated on her lotus throne supported by modified sun and moon discs that contain Tibetan scriptures and are bordered by the traditional patterns of the sacred flames and serve as an aureole around her head as if she were a *bodhisattva*. She is also draped in the girdles, ribbons and bracelets of a *bodhisattva* and emulates Tārā’s bodily posture with one hand in explanation *mudrā* and the other in wish-granting *mudrā*. She is

²⁹⁶ Getty, *The gods of northern Buddhism*, 109.

in half-lotus position with right leg extended, ready to leap to the aid of those who need her. Tārā is surrounded by offering bowls symbolising her devotion and commitment to work for the welfare of beings “until *Sam̐sāra* has been emptied.”²⁹⁷ Thus Rigdol’s Tārā serves as a metaphor for the ideal leader in today’s geo-political climate.

Aung San Suu Kyi does not just represent a beacon of hope to the Buddhist people of Burma (Myanmar), but around the world she is seen as courageous woman and leader, committed to non-violence and the betterment of her people. Ang Chin Geok describes her thus: “She seemed almost, like Athena, to have leapt fully formed and armed into the forefront of the world’s media.”²⁹⁸ In reality, Suu Kyi did not suddenly appear fully formed; however her parentage did set her apart from the beginning, like her heavenly counterparts whose births are marked by something special or miraculous. The role of Suu Kyi’s father as the leader of the Burmese Liberation movement lends her a quasi-royal and semi-divine status in Burma.

While Rigdol’s work does not really attempt to deify the very human Aung San Suu Kyi, she has become legendary, and her apparent wisdom, compassion and courage make her an obvious choice to embody the attributes of Green Tārā in a modern world. It is implicit that the qualities and attributes of Tārā exist in the world in a tangible way. Like the Buddhist Tārā deity, Suu Kyi has acquired her own cult status although she demurs to a personality cult.²⁹⁹ Apart from her ordinary existence as a human being, she has come to symbolise much more, not only in her own country, but around the world.³⁰⁰

The reality of her story is infused with legend. While campaigning in the days before her house arrest she and her supporters were stopped by armed soldiers. Suu Kyi

²⁹⁷ Tāranātha Jo-Nan. *The Origins of the Tārā Tantra*, (c.1600). Edited by David Templeman (Dharamsala: The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1981), 12.

²⁹⁸ Ang, Chin Geok. *Aung San Suu Kyi, towards a new freedom* (Sydney: Prentice Hall, 1998), xi.

²⁹⁹ Erlanger, Steven. “Rangoon Journal; A Daughter of Burma, but can she be a symbol?” (*New York Times*, 11 January 1989).

³⁰⁰ Ang, *Aung San Suu Kyi, towards a new freedom*, 56.

walked alone straight into the line of fire before the soldiers were ordered to stand down.³⁰¹ It was this incident that, more than any other, created the mystique of Aung San Sui Kyi³⁰² and helped to consolidate Suu Kyi's reputation among the Burmese people, many of whom began to consider her a female *bodhisattva*.³⁰³ During her years of house arrest Burmese people carried her effigy on small badges and postcards. Her house became the object of pilgrimage, thousands gathering every week outside her home for her 'gate-side' speeches. Like Tārā, Suu Kyi has said that if her people ever needed her, she would not fail them.³⁰⁴

While Rigdol's Tibetan heritage is important to his identity, like Gonkar Gyatso, his vision has been expanded by his experiences in exile and in the West, so his concerns are broader than issues about Tibet. In transposing Aung San Suu Kyi's image to Green Tārā, Rigdol has produced a universal Tārā for the modern age whose qualities include both spiritual and political leadership, the readiness and willingness to come to the aid of those in need and compassion for all.

Clearly, despite their years living in the West, Tārā is still meaningful to the Tibetan diaspora artists. However, they have interpreted her in new ways that reflect their engagement with Western sensibilities, turning her into a more universal heroine for a modern age, or using modern art techniques and materials to transform her into work of contemporary art beyond her religious significance and Tibetan identity. A number of artists working in Lhasa have also re-interpreted the goddess Tārā.

³⁰¹ Ang, *Aung San Suu Kyi, towards a new freedom*, 63.

³⁰² Peter Popham. *The Lady and the Peacock: the life of Aung San Suu Kyi* (London: Rider, 2011), 127.

³⁰³ Ibid., 128. A joke current in Rangoon in those days told that General Ne Win's favourite daughter, Sanda, had challenged Suu Kyi to a duel. Suu declined saying 'Lets just walk down the street together unarmed and see which of us gets to the other end alive' (Justin Wintle. *Perfect Hostage: A Life of Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's Prisoner of Conscience* (London: Hutchinson, 2007), 319).

³⁰⁴ Ang, *Aung San Suu Kyi, towards a new freedom*, 90, 61.

Tārā in Lhasa

Dedron is one of the few female contemporary artists working in Lhasa. Her work, *Green Tārā*, is part of a series called *My Sisters* (2009) in which the artist celebrates a global sisterhood, portraying women from Queen Elizabeth II to Marilyn Monroe, American athlete Marion Jones and the Mona Lisa, as well as female characters from Tibetan folklore. Dedron's works convey the character of folklore and folk art and display a quintessentially feminine character; her figures are thoughtful, sympathetic and nurturing. These typically female characteristics are not necessarily unknown in the works by male artists nor are they requisite in works by female artists, however, Dedron's art always possesses a certain delicacy and gentleness which feels female.

Green Tārā (fig. 59) is a work unlike traditional portrayals of this Buddhist deity in both composition and concept. Dedron's Tārā is shown in an intimate portrait. The focus in each work of this series is the face, and within the composition are collected the attributes of each character. Dedron employs portrait techniques to achieve an expression of personality, not by using naturalism, but by her own naïve folk-art method of collecting together the objects and symbols which represent clues to the figure's character and imbue the works with depths of meaning.



Figure 59. *Green Tārā*, 2009, Dedron,
mineral pigments on Tibetan paper
54 x 38 cm
(Rossi & Rossi, London)

Dedron does not employ traditional composition and deity posture but relies principally on colour to denote the altruistic warrior nature of Green Tārā. However, Dedron's Tārā also has many of the attributes normally associated with White Tārā, such as the *trinayāna* (three eyes), symbolising knowledge and wisdom and the ability to see beyond the mundane world.³⁰⁵ She has an eye on the palm of her hand, which is also more typical of White Tārā who has eyes on her hands and feet, indicating her omniscience. Dedron's Tārā is also portrayed as a protectress in the form of a mother, as she has three infant creatures clinging around her. Her right breast is fully visible, emphasising her motherly, nurturing aspect.

While Dedron's Tārā differs stylistically to many of the popular depictions of the goddess in Tibetan art, she displays similarities to the fifteenth century White Tārā of the Red Temple of Tsaparang in Guge, Western Tibet (fig. 60). We see correlation, for example, in her five-leafed crown, the blue lotuses above each ear, earrings and bracelet (ornaments of the *bodhisattva*), the *trinayāna*, and the bulbous shape of her breast.

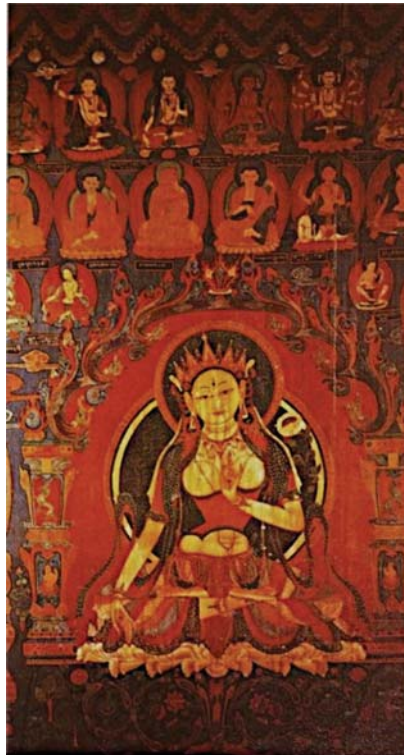


Figure 60. *White Tārā* panel, Red Temple, Tsaparang, Guge, Western Tibet, 15th century, wall painting

³⁰⁵ Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 312.

Dedron has decorated the background with various symbols that have Buddhist significance. Like other deities, Tārā is often seated on a lotus throne with sun and moon discs behind her, whereas Dedron has fashioned a pyramid shaped throne at the top of which is the symbol of the sun and moon. In the Buddhist tradition, the sun and the moon symbolises the twin unity of absolute and relative truth, a concept central to Buddhism.³⁰⁶ With regard to Tārā iconography, the sun and moon may also indicate the lotus flower of White Tārā, representing day, and the blue lotus of Green Tārā, denoting night.

Beneath the sun and moon symbols is the *svastika*, an ancient Indic symbol which is one of the sixty-five marks of Buddhahood found in the imprint of the Buddha's foot and symbolises the esoteric doctrine of Buddhism.³⁰⁷ On top of the throne is a *makara*, a device often seen in Dedron's work, which is a kind of mythological sea-monster, believed to dwell at the base of the earth within the cosmic ocean.³⁰⁸ It represents a *vāhana*, or sacred vehicle, upon which Tārā's throne is sometimes carried. The child on the left of the canvas holds a fish, the *matsya*, one of the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism, representing fertility and abundance as well as salvation from the ocean of life and pain.³⁰⁹

Other stylistic devices emphasise the Tibetanness of Dedron's work; the clouds that float past Tārā's head are typical of Tibetan decorative style. Dedron has also used hand-made Tibetan paper which is scorched or burnt at the edges to render the appearance of antiquity that is reminiscent of ancient Tibetan manuscripts and illuminations. Thus Dedron pays homage to the time-honoured Tibetan traditions.³¹⁰ This stylistic feature is used in each work of the *My Sisters* series and also represents the primal nature of the

³⁰⁶ Bunce. *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 356.

³⁰⁷ Ibid. 294; and Getty. *The gods of northern Buddhism*, 176.

³⁰⁸ Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 171–172.

³⁰⁹ Ibid. 180; Robert Beer. *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 176.

³¹⁰ Dedron, conversation with author, Lhasa, October 2010.

relationship between women: the relationship that women have to their ancestors as well as to each other, no matter their ethnic origins or status in life, whether it be Queen, Goddess, Princess, movie star or figure from folklore or legend. Even in legend, a story of a woman always holds some truth about the female role in society and the nature of woman. In this series, Dedron wanted to show all sides of femininity.³¹¹ She shows Tārā as goddess, protectress, warrior and mother, one who is wise, compassionate and omniscient. While Tārā is Tibetan and Buddhist, the virtuous qualities are universal.

Dedron, who grew up in the Tibetan countryside before moving to Lhasa, has spoken of her deep love of Tibetan people and her unique culture as well as her affinity with nature³¹² which is evident in her earthy sensitivity to colour and composition, filling her works with cultural motifs and little creatures of myth and legend. Her works are imbued with a confidence in and love for her culture, as well as a consciousness of being part of a wider human family. Dedron does not feel bound by iconographical traditions but rather feels an affinity with the Buddhist deities as part of her ancestry, which she weaves into a personal and cultural narrative.

For those who express their affinity with the Tārā deity, such as the artists discussed above, the appeal lies principally in her femininity. To embrace Tārā is to embrace the feminine energy of wisdom, as well as her compassionate mother and saviour aspects. In the works so far discussed, Tārā is portrayed in her *bodhisattva* aspect. However, there is evidence to consider Tārā a Buddha and not merely a *bodhisattva* as is usually assumed. Miranda Shaw, for example, points out that in a number of sources from the seventh to eighth centuries Tārā is attributed with every perfection of character, and all

³¹¹ Dedron. conversation with author, Lhasa, October 2010.

³¹² Dedron. *Nearest to the Sun* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2009), 6-7.

enlightened qualities and powers, and is explicitly referred to as a Buddha.³¹³ Physically, Tārā is said to display the thirty-two major and sixty minor marks of a Buddha.³¹⁴ As Shaw says, “the early writings exalt her as the embodiment of the very principle of Buddhahood. There are assertions that Tārā encompasses the body, speech and mind of all Buddhas and is the essence of all past, present and future Buddhas. Thus, the belief that she is liberator, protector and saviour without equal.”³¹⁵

In *The Origins of the Tārā Tantra*, Tibetan historian, Tāranātha, recorded in the first years of the seventeenth century that Tārā, first known as the Princess “Moon Wisdom,” was a devout follower of the Buddha’s teaching and through her devotions achieved a level of awakening. Tāranātha reports that Tārā was told by monks that because of her virtuous actions she had come into being in a female form, and that her continued dedication would result in a change of form to that of a man.³¹⁶ However, we are told that Tārā said: “In this life there is no such distinction as ‘male’ and ‘female’, neither of ‘self-identity’, a ‘person’ nor any perception (of such), and therefore attachment to ideas of ‘male’ and ‘female’ is quite worthless.” Tārā therefore vowed to remain in female form and work for the welfare of sentient beings until the end (“until *Saṃsāra* has been emptied”). We are then told that Tārā (Moon Wisdom) meditated for ten million and one hundred thousand years and became known as the Saviouress so her name was changed ever after to Tārā.³¹⁷

The Lhasan artist, Jhamsang, not only challenges the notions of male- and femaleness in the Buddhist deities, but also explores the boundaries of iconoclasm by

³¹³ Miranda Shaw. *Buddhist Goddesses of India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2007), 315; see also Martin Wilson. *In Praise of Tārā, Songs to the Saviouress: Source Texts from India and Tibet on Buddhism's Great Goddess* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1992), 32, 274.

³¹⁴ Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*; Martin Wilson, *In Praise of Tārā*, 248.

³¹⁵ Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, 316.

³¹⁶ Tāranātha. *The Origins of the Tārā Tantra* (c.1600). Edited by David Templeman (Dharamsala: The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1981), 11.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

challenging accepted iconographic norms. In his *Buddha* series (2010), Jhamsang portrays a number of Buddhist deities, both male and female, including the historical Buddha, as having overtly female shape and characteristics. Jhamsang chose female emanations for the deities partly because of his aesthetic inclination to give expression through the female form for its visual appeal. In addition, it is Jhamsang's view that the female emanations of the deity better convey the affinity with nature, which is often seen as feminine, and the natural rhythms of life. At the same time, the mechanical and robotic characteristics of his figures signify the masculine worldview which the artist sees as the virile and sometimes destructive effect of 'progress' and technology. The robotic appearance of the deities is a statement about the influence of the modern technology upon the artist's local culture and way of life.³¹⁸

Jhamsang's *Tārā* from the 2010 *Buddha series* (fig. 61) is seated in the crossed legged posture on a modern version of a lotus throne which is minimally decorated with a vaguely Tibetan geometric border pattern. Her shiny metallic skin is like armour through which nothing can pierce. She is the Buddhist comic book heroine in the manner of Wonder Woman.

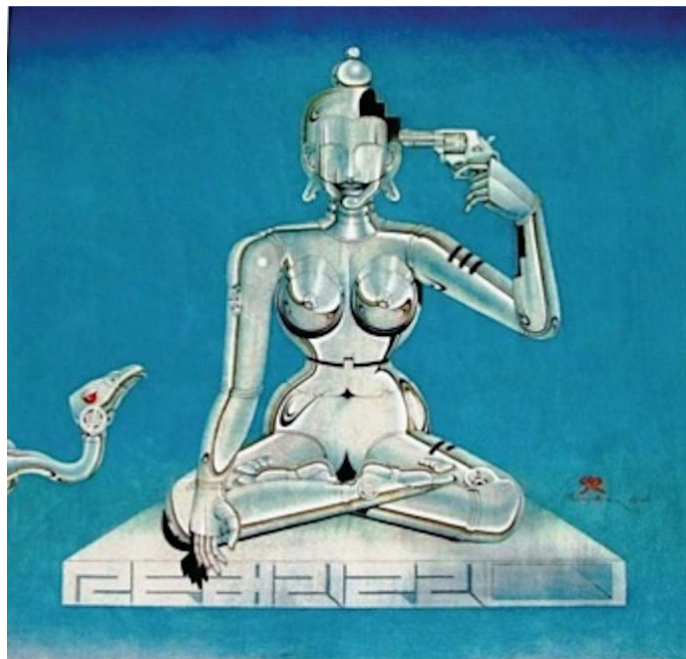


Figure 61. *Tārā* (*New Buddha series*),
2009, Jhamsang, Mixed media,
100 x 100 cm
(Songzhuang Art Museum, Beijing)

³¹⁸ Jhamsang and Nyandak, email correspondence with author, 2013

Although this is a Tārā, she has been given the topknot (*uṣṇīṣa*) and the long earlobes normally associated with the male historical Buddha. Her right hand is in the earth-witnessing *mudrā* (*bhūmisparśa-mudrā*), which is mainly associated with images of the Buddha.³¹⁹ Near to her right hand is a mechanical snake-like creature which appears to represent Māra, the evil one, who seeks to prevent people from achieving enlightenment. Māra is indicated here because it was this very earth-witnessing hand gesture that the historical Buddha is said to have used when Māra challenged his right to sit beneath the legendary Bodhi tree, at the navel of the earth, where all future Buddhas sit. Having no other witnesses, the Buddha touched the earth and called upon it to witness his accumulated merit and fitness to realise *nirvāṇa*.³²⁰ By placing his Tārā in earth-witnessing posture, Jhamsang endows the female deity with the characteristics of the male Buddha, including the right to sit in the place of the Buddhas and the capacity for achieving full enlightenment.

From a feminist-Buddhist point of view, Jhamsang has given Tārā the attributes of a Buddha which are usually associated with male figures. Thus she could be said to express, in Western psychology terms, the anima and animus of Buddha and Tārā; the male element in the female and the female element in the male.

In her left hand Tārā holds a gun to her head, and part of her metallic skull is missing as if blown away by the weapon. According to the artist, the gun represents masculine power which manifests in modern technology and the development of modern

³¹⁹ Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 38.

³²⁰ T. W. Rhys Davids (trans.) *Buddhist Birth Stories; or Jātaka Tales. The Oldest Collection of Folk-lore Extant: Being the Jātakatthavannana for the first time edited in the Original Pali* by V. Fausboll (London: Trubner & Co. Ludgate Hill, 2000 (1880), 101; Henry Clarke Warren (trans.). *Buddhism: Pali Text with English Translation (Introduction to the Jātaka)*, (Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2008 (1896), 125; David L. Snellgrove. *The Image of the Buddha* (Paris and Tokyo: Kodansha International/Unesco, 1978), 67. According to the “The *Nidāna Kathā*” (the Introduction to the *Jātakas* – the story of the lives of the Buddha c.300BCE–500CE) where the story of the Buddha’s enlightenment is related, this was the final event in the Buddha’s epic battle with Māra. Although the earth-witnessing gesture did not take place at the very moment of the Buddha’s enlightenment, it has come to pictorially symbolise the Buddha’s awakening and his victory over Māra. (For translations of the *Nidāna Kathā* see Rhys Davids 2000, Warren 2008.)

devastating weaponry by which societies sow the seeds of self-destruction.³²¹ The image may also be read as Tārā having the power to destroy the ‘ego’ which is viewed as an impediment to enlightenment. As such she can be ‘Tārā Destroyer of All Attachment’ (*Raga-nisudana-tārā*), ‘Destroyer of All Enemies’ from the “21 Homages to Tārā” referred to above. According to the *Tārā Tantra* she sits on a lotus throne and sun disc. In her right hand she holds a trident at her heart piercing an enemy’s body and holds her left forefinger in a threatening gesture. Her essence is mind, her function is mind increasing, and she is the abode of all courage. She destroys the enemies of enlightenment, specifically the enemies that are of the mind: attachment to the internal as ‘I’ and attachment to external things as ‘mine’.³²² Thus in Jhamsang’s work, it is perhaps not the head that has been destroyed by the gun but the ego, the self, the source of all attachment, suffering and prevention of attaining enlightenment. This Tārā represents the power to end suffering once and for all, according to the most fundamental of Buddhist precepts. Viewed in this light there can be no greater super-heroine.

While Jhamsang has produced a shocking image of Tārā pointing a gun at her partially destroyed head, it is not really any more shocking than an image of Tārā holding traditional weapons such as a sword or objects such as a human skull filled with blood. While we have become inured to these symbols because they are seen as holding a traditional place in Tibetan visual culture, their impact is diminished and the violence is hardly felt. The violence is not against physical demons but the demons within the mind or within society, that are given mythical and anthropomorphic form in order to reify them and make them easier to access in allegory than in abstract concepts. These enemies of enlightenment are nonetheless so tenacious and relentless that violent means of destruction are necessitated, hence the ferocious imagery of the traditional iconography.

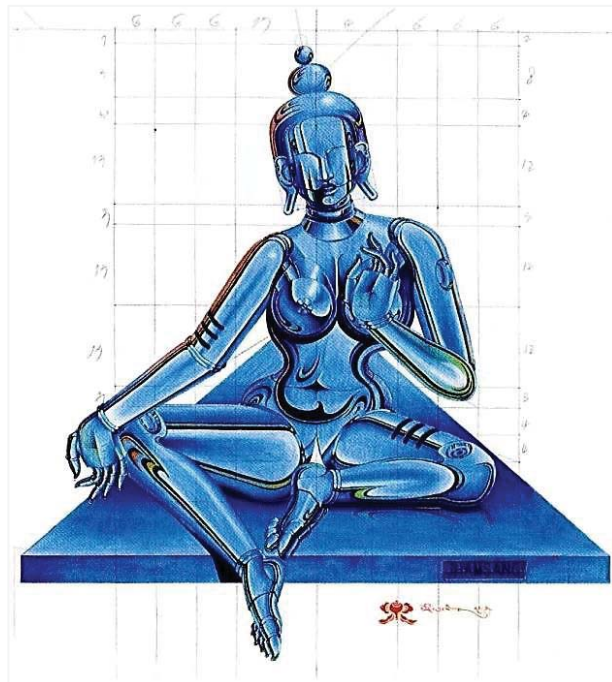
³²¹ Jhamsang and Nyandak, email correspondence with author, 2013.

³²² Wilson, *In Praise of Tārā*, 152-153.

This work was first shown as part of his *New Buddha* series in the ‘Scorching Sun of Tibet’ exhibition in 2010 in Beijing, the first major exhibition in China of contemporary Tibetan art. In his catalogue essay, the curator Li Xianting described Jhamsang’s works as ‘straightforward, representing Buddha with robot’.³²³ This is clearly an oversimplification which does not delve into the intricacies of Tibetan iconography or Buddhist philosophy. What Jhamsang has done is to bring the Buddhist concepts back to their original significance by at once shocking the viewer with the violence necessary to dispel one’s own demons and to illustrate that they are indeed inner demons rather than creatures of myth and legend. In this sense, Jhamsang’s work upholds the meditational value of traditional Tibetan Tantric painting. Jhamsang’s comic book *Tārā* is a meditational deity in modern visual language.

The earliest of the works in this style, *Tara* (2008) appeared in the catalogue for the *Tradition Transformed* exhibition at the Rubin Museum in 2010 (fig. 62). *Tārā* is depicted as super-hero, a futuristic bionic woman. She is not mortal and has super-human powers.

Figure 62. *Tara*, 2008,
Jhamsang, acrylic on canvas,
114.3 x 101.6 cm
(Collection of Shelley and
Donald Rubin)



³²³ Li, Xianting. “Scorching Sun of Tibet.” In *Scorching Sun of Tibet*, exhibition catalogue, 5–9 (Beijing: Songzhuang Art Promotion Association, Gedun Choephel Gallery, 2010), 7.

In this work, a shiny metallic and robotic woman is portrayed in the familiar pose of Green Tārā, with her hands in wish-granting and explanation *mudrā* and with one leg partly extended, ready to leap into action. She is not seated on a lotus throne but on a minimalist platform of modern design without her usual adornments. The figure has been pared back to the essential elements by which we recognize Green Tārā. While the Tārā figure looks to the future, the background connects it to the past, for the figure is depicted within the axes of the traditional iconometric grid which dictates the proportions and composition of the deity. Jhamsang, whose training in traditional *thangka* painting is evident in his rendering of iconometrically correct figures, is perhaps suggesting that the old rules are not merely a relic of the past but a scaffold on which the future can be built; a connection between the past, present and future.

Jhamsang's divine bionic heroines recall the comic book superheroes, secular archetypes who, in fact, share many of the attributes of divine beings. In modern western culture, fictional heroes come to replace the religious icons. If we look to the first feminine super-hero of the modern era, Wonder Woman, whose stories were first published during the Second World War, we find a feminine archetype existing in a masculine dominated world, but who has the physical and mental attributes to save beings from evil and suffering. Her purpose then, is hardly distinguishable from Tārā's, even if her religious conviction differs. Indeed, unlike other modern super-heroes, Wonder Woman has her own religious association above any ethical or moral imperatives that normally motivate superheroes; she belongs to the cult of Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of love and beauty and is described thus:

Beautiful as Aphrodite, wise as Athena, strong as Hercules and swift as Mercury,
Wonder Woman wings her winning way from Paradise Isle, secret home of the

Amazons ... fighting ever fearlessly to conquer evil and create permanent peace and happiness in the world.³²⁴

Thus Wonder Woman not only has attributes of deities, she comes from a semi-divine or sacred place. Among her attributes or powers are her golden tiara and girdle, her magical metal bracelets (the bands of Aphrodite) which protect her in the world and can deflect bullets.³²⁵ She has a magical and unbreakable golden lasso with which she captures evil-doers and compels them to submit.³²⁶ She can communicate telepathically and has her own magical vehicle to carry her, an invisible plane (a concept not unlike the *vāhanas*, or sacred vehicles, of the Buddhist deities). Bryan Dietrich compares Wonder Woman to the Indian goddess and female principle *Śakti*, as well as a Tantric Goddess and the Christian Madonna.³²⁷ Dietrich also notes the boundaries that Wonder Woman crosses: “sea to land, female to male, virgin to mother, woman to warrior.”³²⁸

Jhamsang’s Tārā also crosses boundaries, indeed the archetypal female defender and protector crosses cultural and temporal boundaries. By drawing on influences from Tibetan artistic and religious heritage as well as modern foreign influences of popular secular culture and technology Jhamsang creates a modern female deity which combines Buddhist iconography with pop art to visualise a Tārā of the future.

The goddess Tārā is important in the oeuvre of contemporary Tibetan art because it explores the possibilities of the feminine in philosophy, mythology and relevance to modern life. The artists have explored the idea of the goddess in a multicultural world working for human rights and democracy, as well as the idea of a universal sisterhood,

³²⁴ William Moulton Marston. *The Wonder Woman Chronicles*. Vol. 3 (1943) (New York: DC Comics, 2012), 6.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 78–79.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

³²⁷ Bryan D. Dietrich. “Queen of Pentacles: Archetyping Wonder Woman.” *Extrapolation* (University of Texas) 47, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 207–236, 219.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

encompassing all periods in history as well as ethnicity and culture. They have also experimented with techniques and materials to investigate what a modern goddess would look like and be like.

In their interpretation of Tārā, the artists of the diaspora demonstrate their engagement with world politics, as demonstrated by Rigdol's use of the image of Aung San Suu Kyi. In Lhasa, while Dedron draws from traditional Tibetan folk art in her interpretation of Tārā, other works in the same series, such as *Mona Lisa* and *Marilyn Monroe*, demonstrate the outside influences on her life in Tibet. We conclude that the need for a goddess or respected female figure is not diminished in the modern world in both Tibet and in the West.

Chapter 4. Sacred Geography – Land and Landscape

In this chapter I examine the deconstruction and reconstructions by the contemporary artists of the ‘sacred geography’ in the visual culture of Tibet. Along with language, land is a fundamental cultural identifier.³²⁹ The Tibetan contemporary artists reinterpret existing artistic traditions of land, landscape and folklore to articulate a contemporary social commentary. While the artists in Lhasa focus on the changing landscape of Tibet and ways in which their society and culture has been affected, the diaspora artists portray a land from which they have been displaced yet with which they continue to have a profound connection.

Landscape is not a separate genre in the traditional religious visual culture of Tibet. However, elements of nature (such as earth, air, water and fire), as well sacred places, both mythical and based in reality, have an important place in sacred Tibetan art. We have seen, for example, the *maṇḍala* as representative of Tibetan cosmology, corresponding to the geography of the universe.

In traditional Tibetan art, landscape is used in a way more similar to Chinese landscape or Indian narrative art than the Western counterpart.³³⁰ Since the earliest periods of Chinese art we find panoramic landscape composition from a bird’s eye view. In both the handscroll and mural mediums, works are divided into successive scenes which lead the viewer on a narrative journey through the landscape, moving across multiple vantage points where “temporal sequence [is] joined to spatial extension in ways that cannot be matched in Western easel painting.”³³¹ In addition to the continuous pictorial narrative whereby scenes are delineated into separate spatial cells by elements

³²⁹ See for example: Francesca Merlan. *Caging the Rainbow, Places, Politics and Aborigines in a North Australian Town* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998), 124-125.

³³⁰ Robert E. Fisher *Art of Tibet* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 127, 210.

³³¹ Yang Xin *et al. Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1997), 10.

such as rocks, mountains or trees, landscape elements also provide material for visual metaphors that are woven into the composition.³³² Within the diverse roots of the Chinese landscape tradition, religious and philosophical systems such as Buddhism played a significant role in landscape development, so for example, mountains that appear in early paintings often represent the sacred mountains of Buddhist legends.³³³

In Tibetan painting tradition, all these tropes are regularly employed: the image of the sacred mountain; bird's eye view panoramas; continuous pictorial narrative; multiple viewing points; discrete scenes and linked spaces defined by geographical and other features, temporal and spatial sequences. Landscape is used in Tibetan art in ways that relate both to their Buddhist belief system as well as pre-Buddhist indigenous beliefs and folklore, depicting sacred mountains and the 'purelands' or paradises of Buddhist deities.

Lhasa - Folklore



Figure 63. *The Demoness*, 2006, Gade, 'pecha' (sacred manuscript) format, 11 panels, 75 x 191 cm overall (Plum Blossoms Gallery, Hong Kong)

Gade's 2006 work entitled *The Demoness* (fig. 63), which was shown as part of his first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, *Mushroom Cloud*, draws from different mythological

³³² Yang *et al.* *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 49.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 8.

and artistic traditions and conflates them as a compositional device.

Constructed from panels of handmade Tibetan manuscript paper, Gade used “forms and elements of traditional Tibetan painting, including the unique depiction of time and space in classical Tibetan painting.”³³⁴ This compositional style has distant echoes in both Indian and Chinese narrative art. In traditional Tibetan painting it is most often seen in depictions of ‘*Jātaka* tales’ or scenes from life stories of the Buddha or other Buddhist figures. These scenes, legendary or historical, are usually represented pictorially around the canvas and separated from each other by geographical or architectural devices, such as mountain, palaces or garden walls.

Depictions of the sacred geography of Tibet often occur in the context of creation stories which are frequently conflated with Buddhist histories. In revisions of the story of the first propagation of Buddhism in Tibet, the land has been portrayed in the form of a supine demoness (*srin mo*). In the traditional Buddhist account, this female *srin-mo* is particularly resistant to the new religion. The whole land of Tibet is seen as the embodiment of the vast recumbent body of this demoness. Before Buddhism could be established in the country, the *srin mo* - her body and therefore the land – needed to be subdued.³³⁵ It is as if the land itself is converted to Buddhism, not merely the inhabitants.

According to a twelfth century account,³³⁶ the *srin-mo* is perceived by Princess Wencheng, the Chinese wife of the Tibetan King, as she consults her geomantical charts to solve the impediments to transporting a Buddha statue to Lhasa.³³⁷ Princess Wencheng (or Kong jo, as she is called in Tibet) saw that Tibet was like a supine *srin-mo*: the Lhasa

³³⁴ Gade. “Artist Statement.” In *Mushroom Cloud* (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Ltd, 2008), 63.

³³⁵ R. A. Stein. *Tibetan Civilisation*. Trans. J. E. Stapleton Driver (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 38–39.

³³⁶ Michael Aris identifies the *Mani bka’ ‘bum*, a twelfth century *terma* (revealed text) account of King Songtsen Gampo (613–649), as the first appearance of the demoness. It therefore postdates the entry of Buddhism into Tibet by several centuries. Michael Aris. *Bhutan, the Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1979), 8; see also R. A. Stein. *Op. Cit.*, 38.

³³⁷ Janet Gyatso. “Down with the Demoness: Reflections on a Feminine Ground in Tibet.” In *Feminine Ground, Essays on Women in Tibet*, edited by Janice D. Willis (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1989, 33–51), 37.

valley (the Plain of Milk) was the palace of the king of the *klu* spirits,³³⁸ and the lake in the Plain of Milk was the heart-blood of the demoness. The three mountains surrounding the valley were her two breasts and the vein of her life-force.³³⁹ (fig. 64)



Figure 64. *The Demoness of Tibet*, Tibet, c. early 20th century, ground mineral pigment on cotton (Rubin Museum of Art)

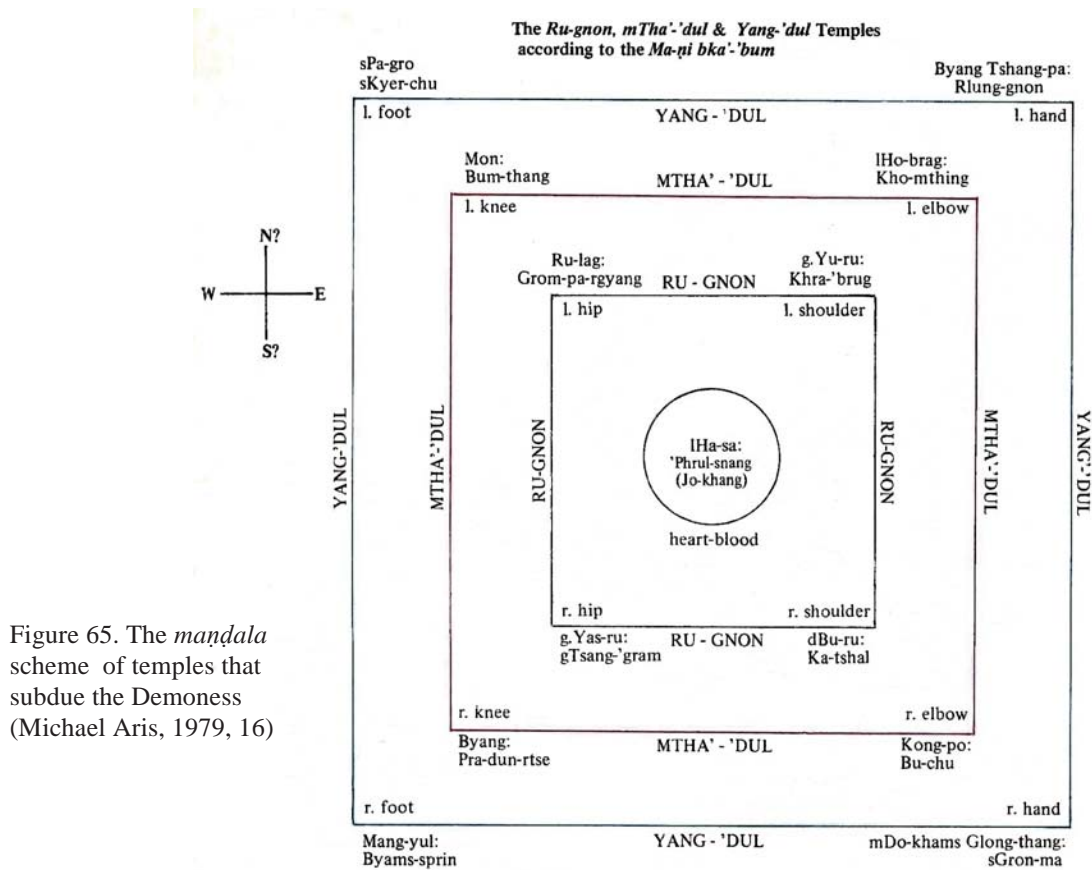
Certain sites inhabited by the indigenous Tibetan spirits were seen as ‘faults’ in the landscape and needed to be transformed to counteract the inauspicious configurations in the Tibetan land and to enable the building of the Jokhang temple.³⁴⁰ The demoness was finally subdued by the construction of Buddhist temples at key points across the country. The Jokhang Temple was poised on the *srin-mo*’s heart. The buildings on her shoulders and hips subdued the four main sectors; the temples on her knees and elbows controlled the four inner borders, and those on her hands and feet, the four outer borders. Thus an elaborate scheme of thirteen Buddhist temples was articulated that followed the design of a *maṇḍala* (fig. 65).³⁴¹

³³⁸ *Klu* – water snake spirits equivalent to *nāgas* of Indian mythology (Samten G. Karmay. *The Arrow and the Spindle, Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998), 253.

³³⁹ Michael Aris. *Bhutan, the Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1979, 12.

³⁴⁰ J. Gyatso, “Down with the Demoness,” 38; Aris, *Bhutan, the Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*, 14.

³⁴¹ J. Gyatso, “Down with the Demoness,” 38; Aris, *Bhutan, the Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*, 15.



The demoness legend is essentially the story of the conquest by Buddhism over the pre-Buddhist animist beliefs (that Stein calls the ‘nameless religion’³⁴²) and the intrinsic features of the two belief systems remain strongly intertwined in folklore and the Tibetan world-view; for example, the animist *srin* beings are sometimes placed in the retinues of the wrathful Buddhist deities.³⁴³ Comparisons may be made with various conceptions of creation myths and earth goddesses, such as the Dreamtime ancestors of indigenous Australians who do not merely belong to a past time but are extant, albeit on another plane. They are responsible for the geography of the cosmos, the earth and the heavens. The Dreaming beings as well as the places into which their bodies transform³⁴⁴ are the most prevalent theme of their art as they connect humans with the land.

In Gade’s work, the land is formed by other histories, figures and events. In place of

³⁴² R.A. Stein. *Tibetan Civilisation* (Trans. J. E. Stapleton Driver. London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 191.

³⁴³ J. Gyatso, “Down with the Demoness,” 35.

³⁴⁴ Francesca Merlan. *Caging the Rainbow; Places, Politics and Aborigines in a North Australian Town* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press 1998), 213.

the usual iconography associated with the Demoness legend, Gade depicts passages from the history and culture of Tibet, both ancient and modern. The landscape is filled with mountain peaks, clouds, rivers and all manner of strange and mythological flora and fauna. At the heart of the Demoness, where the Jokhang temple is usually situated, Gade places an image of the Reclining Buddha³⁴⁵ (fig. 66).



Figure 66. *The Demoness*, Gade (detail – left side)

At the right elbow of the Demoness is a fine lady being carried in a palanquin, possibly Princess Wencheng herself. In the vicinity of the Demoness' chin, is a ladder; symbolism derived from another myth concerning the first kings of Tibet who used a ladder and cord to descend from heaven to the sacred mountain Gyang-to.³⁴⁶ The ladder symbolises the connection between man and heaven.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵ The Buddha reclining, or in *Parinirvāṇa* (S.), represents the historical Buddha in his final moments before death. He lies on his right side, at the point of leaving his physical form and passing into final enlightenment. (Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 222.)

³⁴⁶ The successive kings return to heaven by the same means until the seventh king accidentally cuts his 'heavenly cord' and cannot return to heaven (Samten G. Karmay. *The Arrow and the Spindle, Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998), 252.)

³⁴⁷ It is believed that everyone is born with this cord on his head and Karmay suggests that contemporary ritual gestures involving special cords and scarves (*katags*) have symbolic significance, renewing the former accord between man and heaven. (Ibid., 418.)

On the Demoness' right forearm (fig. 66) is a group of soldiers in Western colonial dress, an allusion to the British invasion of Tibet in 1904. Travelling from her left foot and over her knee (fig. 67) is a train of carriages alluding to both the modern railway and the caravans of the ancient silk route. On a mountain top on the right knee are two Red Guards from the Cultural Revolution era, clutching their Red Books of the sayings of Mao Tse Tung, and gesturing with evangelical zeal (a pose characteristic of the Chinese propaganda poster art of the period) to the land beyond the mountains – to Tibet.



Figure 67. *The Demoness*, Gade, (detail – right side)

At the position of the Demoness' buttock, is a yak hide raft (the traditional Tibetan method of river travel) with a number of figures on board.³⁴⁸ On the vessel is the Buddha, who can be discerned from the characteristic shape of his head with topknot, elongated ears and halo. With him are a number of characters representative of historical and mythological Tibet: a Chinese peasant, a Tibetan nomad in *chuba*,³⁴⁹ a *bodhisattva* with ornaments, a Tibetan woman with traditional headdress, an Indian pandit, a monk, a mythical bird, and E.T. (one of the artist's favourite characters from childhood).

³⁴⁸ This sequence recalls an earlier work by Gade, *Sentient Beings on a Yak Hide Raft* (1997).

³⁴⁹ *Chuba*: traditional Tibetan garment, long wrap-around robe made of wool worn by both men and women.

The temples in the original legend not only suppress the sites of the old spirits, they transform them into Buddhist ground. As Janet Gyatso observes, the old sites of the indigenous religion are associated with special configuration of land and mysterious forces. The new Buddhist religion expropriates those sites and builds on them. Thus the new structures obliterate the old sacred sites but subsume their power.³⁵⁰ In Gade's version of the Demoness, those sites are changed again. Whilst the land of Tibet remains permeated with strange mythological creatures or spirits, as well as Buddhist indications, these are now pervaded with secular sites and activities, modern and foreign influences, taxis, planes and helicopters, and new icons like Mickey Mouse. New myths, legends and histories are built, layer upon layer.

Gade is interested in the state of the people who are living in Tibet's changing society: the "cultural icons such as Mickey Mouse are a reflection of the current cultural state of Tibet affected by the Cultural Revolution and globalization. There is no longer a single, homogenous culture in Tibet. Rather it is hybrid and diverse."³⁵¹ Gade wants to locate traditional Tibetan art in a contemporary context. He tries to imagine what a Tibetan painting looks like when detached from religion.³⁵² So although his work is replete with Buddhist references, these are also cultural representations. As Leigh Miller Sangster writes: "[Gade's] mission is not to preserve the past or make prescriptions for the future, but to document the present."³⁵³ While contemporary Tibetan art draws from cultural memory, Miller suggests the works "do not give us nostalgia for a fantasy or an idealised museum-specimen Tibet, but is an experiment in the sustainability of Tibetan cultural identity in twenty-first century China."³⁵⁴

³⁵⁰ Janet Gyatso, "Down with the Demoness," 43.

³⁵¹ Gade. "Artist Statement." In *Mushroom Cloud* (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Ltd, 2008), 63.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Leigh Miller Sangster. "Gade – Mushroom Cloud." In *Mushroom Cloud* (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Gallery, 2008, 16–19), 17.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 19.

In his catalogue essay for the *Mushroom Cloud* exhibition, Ian Findlay-Brown suggested that works such as these by Gade help “to dispel many of the myths and inconsistencies about contemporary Tibetan culture and society that have been perpetrated by foreigners ignorant of the Tibetan reality of today.”³⁵⁵ For Tibetan artists, there are many different realities. There is also a clear dissatisfaction with the outside world that looks in.³⁵⁶ In *The Demoness*, Gade portrays a complex and multifaceted view of Tibet in response to the stereotype that is often perpetuated in the West. He inserts pre-Buddhist and Buddhist references, passages from the Colonial period and the Cultural Revolution, together with contemporary secular and religious culture, presenting Tibet, not as a legendary place but a society with a real and complex history and culture. His work highlights that while modern Tibetan culture is increasingly diluted by influences from China and the West, encounters with foreign cultures go back to the turn of the twentieth century in the case of the British expedition, or the marriage of a Chinese Princess to the Tibetan king in the seventh century. Thus, the hybridity of Tibetan society is not entirely new.

Śambhalaḥ to Shangri-La

Another aspect of the sacred geography of Tibet combines Tibetan folklore, Indian mythology and Buddhist eschatology. It concerns the sacred domain of Śambhalaḥ, the legendary Buddhist paradise, or pureland, and forerunner to Shangri-La as a mystical and perfect place. According to Buddhist doctrine, the ninety-six provinces of Śambhalaḥ are laid out like a *maṇḍala* and are surrounded by Snow Mountains (fig. 68). It is related to the *Kālacakra maṇḍala* which has become, since the twelfth century, important in the Tantric cosmology of Tibet. According to the *Kālacakra Tantra*, barbarians and

³⁵⁵ Ian Findlay-Brown. “Wandering Among Icons.” In *Mushroom Cloud*, by Gade (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Gallery, 2008, 8–11), 8.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 11.

unbelievers would be vanquished by a new king from the north who would save the world at the end of time.³⁵⁷ For Tibetans, the Kālacakra provided a cosmology that confirmed the locus of the true *dharma* (Buddhist law) as being in the northern hidden country of Śambhalaḥ. Not only did this paradigm work with the indigenous beliefs of ‘hidden mystic valleys’ and the *terma* (revealed scripture) tradition, but the mythology also reinforced an emerging Tibetan idea that the *dharma* had taken refuge and hidden in Tibet itself.³⁵⁸



Figure 68. *The Kingdom of Śambhalaḥ and Buddhist Armageddon*, Eastern Tibet, 18th century, 175.3 x 196.9 cm (Zimmerman Family Collection)

This mythical land of Śambhalaḥ came to be re-configured in the Western cultural imagination as Shangri-La, and it is this myth that a number of the contemporary Tibetan artists have confronted and engaged with, in their quest to reconstruct and reclaim identity. Tibet was given the sobriquet Shangri-La after the novel *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton, published in 1933 and adapted to film in 1937. Hilton’s Shangri-La is secluded and almost impossible to reach, on the far side of a mountain range. While it is located in Tibet, the detail comes from the Western imagination. Although the characters were

³⁵⁷ R.A. Stein. *Tibetan Civilisation*. Trans. J. E. Stapleton Driver (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 55.

³⁵⁸ Ronald M. Davidson. *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 41.

portrayed as inherently flawed, the possibility of the existence of a perfect place whose role it is to save the world from itself, parallels the Tibetan Śambhalaḥ legend.

This idealised form of civilization is seen as “truer” than the rational West gone “off the rails.”³⁵⁹ The oversimplification, Susan Sontag suggests, is because these supposedly ideal civilisations are being used only as models and stimulants for the imagination precisely because they are not accessible.³⁶⁰ Alex McKay proposes that the imagining of Tibet serves only to obstruct the understanding of historical realities.³⁶¹ The western myths of Tibet effectively hijack Tibetan identity promoting expectations of a remote Utopia which cannot be fulfilled.

Tibet continues to be burdened with this role by some in the West, being lauded as “the altar of the earth.”³⁶² Claims are made in popular film that the Tibetan people “have practised non-violence for over a thousand years”³⁶³ yet we have detailed accounts of brigandage and violence from travellers and scholars, such as Giuseppe Tucci, who made numerous research expeditions to Tibet.³⁶⁴

The mythologizing of Tibet as a sacred place is explored in another allegorical work by Gade, *Railway Train*, in which the land of Tibet is portrayed in the anthropomorphic form of the Reclining Buddha (fig. 69). The work was part of the exhibition *Lhasa Train* at Peaceful Wind Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico in 2006, in which twenty artists from Lhasa interpreted the arrival of the Beijing-Lhasa railway.

³⁵⁹ Susan Sontag. “Artaud.” In *Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988, xvii-lix), xli.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Alex McKay. “Introduction,” in *Tibet and her Neighbours*. Alex McKay (ed) (London: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 2003) 10.

³⁶² *Tibet, Cry of the Snow Lion*. 103 min. Directed by Tom Peosay (Produced by Earthworks Films/Zambuling Pictures. 2002).

³⁶³ *Kundun*. 134 min. Directed by Martin Scorsese. Screenplay by Melissa Mathison. Performed by Gyume Tethong (Produced by Barbara De Fina, 1997).

³⁶⁴ For example: Heinrich Harrer, *Seven Years in Tibet* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), 89; Sven Hedin, *Trans-Himalaya: Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet*. Vol. II (London: Macmillan & Co., 1909) 339; George N. Patterson, *Tibetan Journey* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954) 21; Tucci. *Tibet, Land of Snows*, 143.



Figure 69. *Railway Train*, 2006, Gade, mixed media on handmade Tibetan paper, 60 x 130 cm (Peaceful Wind Gallery, Santa Fe)

In *Railway Train* the Reclining Buddha is a metaphor for Tibet because the land is inextricably linked with Buddhism. Tibet is thus imagined as the embodiment of the religion. However, Gade depicts Tibet as a kind of religious theme park. He describes the work and the ideas behind it in the exhibition catalogue:

The whole shape is of the reclining Buddha. Nowadays Tibet has lots of changes brought by the West, and the East too. Our generation is a time when we experience this the most and see the effects from all of these changes. In my painting you can see lots of things, like Disneyland, a China Mobile signboard, Coca Cola signboards, which are seen by us every day in our lives. Of course, Disneyland is not here yet, but just like the train, maybe in the future it will also come to Tibet.³⁶⁵

The focal point of the composition is the new Lhasa train, named 'Qing 1',³⁶⁶ which brings visitors from the West and from China. Among the passengers, the first is the historical Buddha, referring to the entry of the Indian religion into Tibet in the seventh century. Further up the train we see the famous profile of Sherlock Homes who made a fictional excursion into Tibet³⁶⁷. Also on board is the character E.T. who entered Tibet via

³⁶⁵ Gade, *Lhasa Train* exhibition catalogue, Peaceful Wind Gallery, Santa Fe, 2006. www.asianart.com/exhibitions/lhasatrain/3.html.

³⁶⁶ Abrahm Lustgarten. *China's Great Train: Beijing's Drive West and the Campaign to Remake Tibet* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008), 231.

³⁶⁷ In 1903 Sir Arthur Conan Doyle made a fictional foray into Tibet. (Doyle has been connected to the Theosophical Society founded in 1875 by Madam Blavatsky who claimed to be in touch with mysterious masters in Tibet.) In *The Adventure of the Empty House* Sherlock Holmes, who was supposedly killed at Reichenbach Falls at the hands of his arch enemy Moriarty, has in fact been travelling incognito for three years, two of which were spent wandering in Tibet where he attained entry to Lhasa and met the 'head

cinema, television and merchandise. The train takes a circuitous route around the landscape/amusement park, in and out of tunnels passing various spectacles on the way: dancing *ḍākinīs* watched by tourists, Buddhist stupas, mythical creatures, snow leopards and yaks. There is also the mythical Tibetan Khyung (horned eagle or Garuda) bird that symbolises wisdom and whose likeness has been found on ancient rock carvings from the pre-Buddhist period.³⁶⁸ There are wrathful deities clutching the ritual dagger (*phurpa*) or lightening bolt (*dorjé*) and the ritual bell (*drilbu*), as well as meditating monks or *yogis* in mountain caves.



Figure 70. *Railway Train*, Gade (detail - right)

On the far right is a scene that again references his earlier work *Sentient Beings in a Yak Hide Raft* (fig. 70). We see two people in traditional *chuba* and head dress in a yak hide craft which is steered from the front with an oar. In the boat are also a yak and a horse, both sentient beings and icons of Tibet. The image recalls the Greek myth of Charon who ferries the souls of the dead across the river Styx. The next sequence

lama.' Arthur Conan Doyle. "The Empty House." In *The Return of Sherlock Homes*, 7–29 (London: Penguin, 1981) 16. This joinder of the seemingly immortal Sherlock Holmes, who has mental powers beyond those of normal people, with Tibet serves to enhance the mystery of both Holmes and Tibet. In very few words, Holmes is placed on the same plane as the lamas. Tibetan author and social commentator, Jamyang Norbu, pursued the invention of Holmes' journey in Tibet in his novel *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes, The Adventures of the Great Detective in India and Tibet* (London: Harper Collins, 2009).

³⁶⁸ John Vincent Bellezza. "Images of Lost Civilization: The Ancient Rock Art of Upper Tibet." *Asianart*. 22 November 2000. www.asianart.com/articles/rockart/index.html.

travelling west across the canvas is another motif frequently used by the artist, the Money Tree. In this scene we see golden coins adorning the branches like blossoms and a pair of lovers embracing under the canopy, while up above a monkey-demon disguised as cupid prepares to shoot an arrow at them. Another monkey-like creature in the tree appears to be stealing some of the coins recalling the legendary monkey who steals the elixir of life or peaches of immortality.³⁶⁹ The legend of the money tree recalls animist beliefs in which powerful spirits, both malevolent and protective, inhabit things such as trees. *Lha-shing* is the Tibetan life-spirit tree. The Chinese money tree, decorated with magical creatures, celestial figures and auspicious animals, is associated with paradise and immortality, and the coins link paradise with a material bounty in this world.³⁷⁰ Here the influences of Chinese folklore are mingled with Tibetan folklore and Buddhist imagery, and we are reminded again that the artist's parentage is both Chinese and Tibetan.

A Gothic fairy-tale castle appears in the middle ground, totally incongruous in the Tibetan landscape but representative of Western influences mingling with Tibetan and Chinese. A Tibetan lama and a western fairy-tale witch on a broomstick fly through the air around the castle. These figures recall the myth of the flying or levitating Tibetan monk, as well as the wrathful female protector of Tibet, Palden Lhamo, who according to Buddhist iconography rides a wild mule rather than a broom-stick but carries a long club topped with a lightening bolt.

On the left side of the painting a traditional Tibetan building rises in caricature of the Potala Palace, the traditional residence of the Dalai Lama (fig. 71). It is thus a symbol of both spiritual and temporal power. In Gade's work, the vast signage that overshadows the palace is the Coca-Cola logo, giving the impression that the theme park is sponsored by the giant multi-national corporation, the new holder of emotional and temporal power.

³⁶⁹ Philip Ardagh. *Chinese Myths and Legends* (Chicago: World Book, Inc., 2002), 45–46.

³⁷⁰ Stanley K. Abe. *Ordinary Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 33.

Trade marks and logos have become the new icons in the ideology of consumerism since the exposure of Tibet to the outside world by the annexation by China.



Figure 71. *Railway Train*, Gade (detail - left)

As mentioned above, in these panorama paintings Gade references a traditional style of Tibetan painting which incorporates architecture, landscape and narrative. We can see certain similarities, for example, with a traditional *thangka* from Eastern Tibet, *A Buddhist King with Landscape and Heavens* (fig. 72).



Figure 72. *A Buddhist King with Landscape and Heavens*, Eastern Tibet, 2nd half 17th to 1st half 18th century, *thangka*, pigments on cotton, 152.4 x 243.8 cm (Collection of Shelley & Donald Rubin, New York)

This *thangka* is a consummate example of the architectural-landscape style, which

incorporates narratives of myth and legend, history and doctrine. The focus of this *thangka* is a Buddhist king and his court receiving petitioners bearing gifts. The king holds the royal wheel of power, a symbol of the mythical last king of Śambhalāḥ.³⁷¹ It is a portrayal of the ideal Buddhist king who rules according to the *dharma* and fosters the pursuit of enlightenment of all sentient beings.

The scene is divided by geographical and architectural features. In the mountains are caves with practicing yogis. Here and there about the landscape, in grottoes and in dwellings, monks and householders practice meditation and read scriptures. The land is prosperous, the animals are plentiful and fat, the trees are full of jewels and the people live well, wearing rich clothes and riding horses. It is reminiscent of Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good Government* (1337–39) in the Palazzo Pubblico in Sienna, which illustrates that wise benevolent government results in a happy and prosperous State.

In the upper left of the *thangka* is an elephant, an animal that has significance in Buddhist mythology originating in India. This zoomorphic sequence refers to the story of the 'four harmonious brothers' (or friends), a parable supposedly told by the historical Buddha to his followers to teach them the importance of respect, harmony and collaboration.³⁷² This vignette is echoed in a scene on the left side of Gade's work (fig. 71) in which an elaborately caparisoned elephant (also a common feature of the European style circus) is being ridden not only by the monkey, hare and partridge, but by the mahout (elephant driver) who is a Chinese communist in a Mao suit. At the back is a man with a megaphone. These very strange bedfellows illustrate the adulteration of Tibetan culture through the penetration of influences from China and the West, and the

³⁷¹ Rhie and Thurman. *Worlds of Transformation, Tibetan Art of Wisdom and Compassion*, 449.

³⁷² Loden Sherap Daggyab. *Buddhist Symbols in Tibetan Culture*. Translated by Maurice Walshe (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 107. As told in the canonical text the *Foundation of Discipline* ('Dul-ba gzhi, Skt. *Vinayavastu*): Once there lived in the forest a partridge, a hare, a monkey and an elephant, who were friends. With the aid of a tree they established their respective ages, and accordingly, the younger animals respected the older ones. They obeyed the law and lived a virtuous life. Soon, all the animals adopted their ways, and eventually the king did likewise, and peace and happiness prevailed in the land.

exploitation of Tibet by China as a tourist destination.

In the scene on the far left side of the panorama, action takes place on the flat roof of a traditional Tibetan building (fig. 71). Incense wafts into the air from a juniper stove (*sangkhang*) to invoke and appease the deities. On a ladder a man in western clothing wears a set of wings and looks to the heavens and appears to be reciting a *mantra* before launching forth, hopefully to fly on the wings on enlightenment.³⁷³ Another man on a ladder at the side of the building holds a pennant aloft. The ladder recalls the sacred ladder mentioned above by which the first kings descended to earth and ascended to heaven, symbolising the connection between man and heaven.³⁷⁴

Gade makes reference in many of his works to the idea that Buddhism is being displaced in Tibet by the ideologies of capitalism and consumerism. In this work Tibet is reincarnated as an amusement park where the entertainment themes are religion and folk tradition; a Shangri-La where tourists can come for rejuvenation amongst the snow-capped mountains and find wisdom with their Coca-Cola. Thus the authentic Tibet is replaced by a fake one that generates money, and tourists are the new pilgrims. As Gade explains:

Tibet has gone through a cultural revolution, and now commercialism, so now Tibetan culture has become some sort of circus center, or resort center, where you can see everything. Some things are very foreign, almost extraterrestrial. All of these changes are not brought only by the train, but the train plays the role of instigator and is a focus point. So now we cannot place our identity in a fixed area, as there are too many things that have happened. And we feel this loss of identity, and maybe we are the only generation to experience such a thing. I am just displaying such circumstances.³⁷⁵

³⁷³ The scene is also reminiscent of the Greek legend of Icarus who was enabled to fly with wings made of wax and feathers. Heedless of his father's warning he flew too near the sun, causing the wax to melt, thus he fell into the sea and drowned.

³⁷⁴ Samten G. Karmay. *The Arrow and the Spindle, Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998), 252.

³⁷⁵ Gade. *Lhasa Train*, catalogue, 2006.

Gade reconstructs Tibetan pictorial traditions and, by confronting the myth and exposing the reality, moves towards reclaiming a Tibetan identity in the present.

In another variation on these themes, *New Tibet* (2006) (fig. 73), Gade juxtaposes a pictorial medium that derives from illuminations of Tibetan scriptures with panoramas of incongruous scenes and landscape. His use of murky mineral pigment enhances the effect that, at first glance, the works appear to be within the traditional visual tradition. However, on closer inspection one is confronted with a disturbing reality that challenges the outsider's image of both a traditional and a post-occupation Tibet. Gade demonstrates the influence on Tibet by both China and the West, with particular emphasis on importation of modern culture, consumerism, materialism, economics, industry and ecology. He reveals the effects, both good and bad, on Tibetan society and the landscape both urban and rural.



Figure 73. *New Tibet*, 2006, Gade, mineral colour and acrylic on handmade Tibetan paper, 18 x 117 cm (University of Colorado Art Museum, Boulder)

In an interview in 2004 Gade addressed the stereotyping of Tibet: “foreigners think that Tibet is only religious but this culture is more complicated. We also like to eat fast food and watch American movies. We need to represent real life and ask real questions.”³⁷⁶ Gade is concerned with depicting his real life in Tibet. He proposes that the contemporary Tibetan artists “are recording the transmigration of a civilization and a disappearing myth.”³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ Gade quoted by Craig Simons. “At a Gallery in Lhasa.” (*New York Times*. 22 November 2004). www.nytimes.com/2004/11/22/arts/design/22tibe.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0.

³⁷⁷ Gade. “Modern Art in Tibet and the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild.” In *Visions from Tibet: A brief survey of contemporary painting*, exhibition catalogue, Peaceful Wind Gallery, Santa Fe, N.M. (London: Rossi & Rossi, Peaceful Wind, 2005, 16–17), 16.

Gade adopts the design and layout of religious painting but substitutes deities with modern icons that more aptly fit with life in modern Tibet. He constructs a panorama of the endless Tibetan mountain range seen from a bird's eye view and with multiple vantage points. In this way, the story of the landscape is revealed; the landscape is the setting and integral part of the story. The technique lends itself well to the Tibetan mountains whose timeless snow capped peaks, impenetrable high passes, narrow valleys and snaking rivers converge with modernity in the shape of serpentine roads winding around the mountains, bullet trains plunging through them over raised railway bridges to urban centres of sky scrapers and industrial complexes.

The wide and shortened Tibetan paper with burnt edges is made to resemble religious manuscript (*pecha*) and to enhance the artist's story-telling tableau; it implies an ancient source. The magical clouds, which traditionally surround the snow mountains (*kang-ri*) in Tibetan art, now curl themselves around twin towers of steel and glass that stand as high as the mountains themselves. A plane flies over the mountains towards the East. Satellite dishes beam communications into the new Tibet. In this futuristic image, very little is really surprising. Today, Lhasa is a modern city with multi-level department stores and continuous suburbs of apartment blocks. Down town Lhasa has not yet reached the same heights of other Chinese cities such as Beijing or Shanghai, but this view is not so far from reality and a distinct possibility. The train too has arrived, the culmination of an engineering feat, on the highest railway track in the world over hundreds of miles of permafrost.³⁷⁸

On the right side of the work (fig. 74) is a military base with watch-towers and security fences, armoured vehicles and a missile being launched, leaving in its wake clouds of smoke and fire. In this work, fire takes on the aspect of destruction in the form

³⁷⁸ Lustgarten. *China's Great Train*, 67, 200.

of pollution or nuclear fall-out. It is an only too realistic picture of the Chinese impact on the ecologically sensitive and politically strategic region of the Tibetan plateau; air pollution is already on rise in Tibet.³⁷⁹ Geological surveys made in preparation for the railway project found mineral reserves worth billions of dollars, thus making Tibet one of the richest areas in China's territory.³⁸⁰ Scars from mining are now visible on the Tibetan countryside; soil and water contamination, spillage from oil drilling and pollution from smelting are now new problems in Tibet.³⁸¹

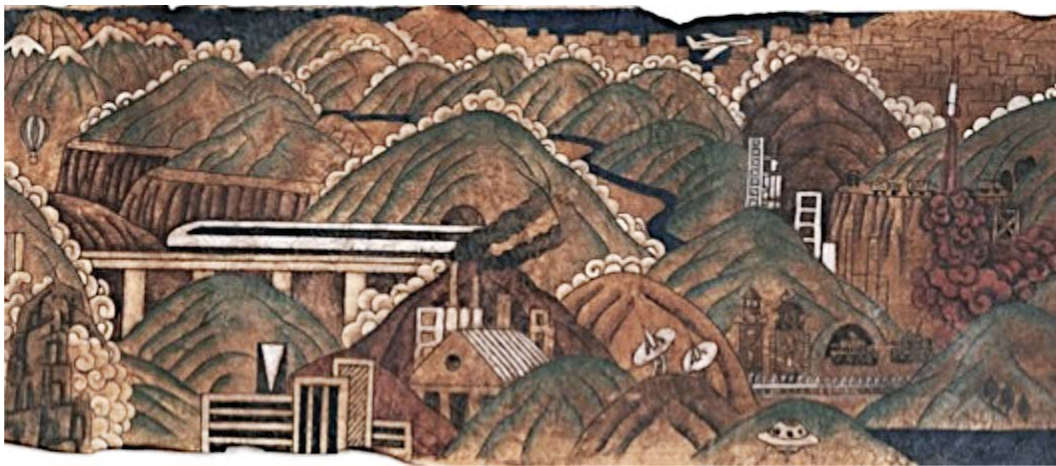


Figure 74. *New Tibet* (detail - right)



Figure 75. *New Tibet* (detail - left)

In the left foreground (fig. 75), we find a crumbling monastery while elsewhere

³⁷⁹ Lustgarten. *China's Great Train*, 276.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 243-4.

modern skyscrapers rise. A giant Ferris wheel represents the Kālacakra, the wheel of time, signifying impermanence and associated with the mystical land of Śambhalaḥ. This ‘New Tibet’ is a far cry from the Shangri-La of the western imagination. It is this reality of modern Tibet that Gade wants us to see.

A different approach to the deconstruction of the Shangri-La myth is taken by Tsewang Tashi who is professor of art at Tibet University in Lhasa and one of the first group of Tibetan art students to study in Beijing in the 1980s. In his photographic series *Shangri-La* (2008), Tashi confronts both the Western Shangri-La myth and the Chinese romantic primitivist projection of Tibet. As his work highlights, it is not only the West that is responsible for the creation of the idealised image of Tibet. Donald Lopez and Clare Harris have proposed that Tibet is a contested idea that exists in the imagination.³⁸² Similarly, as Said has pointed out, the image that the West creates for itself of the East is not exclusively determined by the West.³⁸³ For instance, the first films of Tibet in the 1920s were edited by the Tibetan elite who influenced the Tibetan images expressed in Western films and this editorialisation has continued for a post-occupied Tibet.³⁸⁴

China has also constructed its own mythologized image of Tibet. In the earliest days of the new Communist regime, the Chinese portrayed Tibet as a barbaric feudal society.³⁸⁵ The first propaganda images showed Tibetans as simple peasants in exotic costume who were delighted to be finally liberated.³⁸⁶ This image was replaced after the Cultural Revolution with a representation in the style of European genre painting, depicting Tibetan nomads in the countryside, at one with nature, often with their animals. This is the romantic stereotype image that endures to this day in parallel with the Western

³⁸² Harris. *In the Image of Tibet, Tibetan Painting after 1959*; Donald S. Lopez Jr. *Prisoners of Shangri-La; Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

³⁸³ Said. “Orientalism.” In *The Edward Said Reader*, 79.

³⁸⁴ Martin Brauen. *Dreamworld Tibet; Western Illusions*. Translated by Martin Wilson (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2004), 131.

³⁸⁵ W. Smith. “The Transformation of Tibetan National Identity,” 208.

³⁸⁶ The Propaganda Poster Art Centre, Shanghai, PRC.

idealised image.

The *Shangri-La* photographic series is a conscious reply to a series of pastoral paintings by Chen Danqing, a Chinese painter who entered the graduate program at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1978 and was part of the Native Soil art or Rustic Realism movement that emerged in China in the late 1970s.³⁸⁷ In its day, the style in which Chen painted was as radical as the art of Jean-François Millet in nineteenth century France.³⁸⁸ The original intention of the Native Soil art movement was to repudiate the idealism of the paradoxically termed Socialist Realism, in favour of a more humanist and authentic portrayal of life in China under communism.³⁸⁹ However, this pastoral style has come to be seen in a different light in the ethnic Tibetan region as a caricature or stereotype of Tibetans, but is sought after by Chinese and Western tourists alike.³⁹⁰ The originals and prints of the works of Chen Danqing and other exponents of the style, such as Ai Xuan, continue to fetch high prices in the Hong Kong and Chinese high-end art markets. Reproductions, often blatant plagiaries, and prints of their paintings can be bought by the dozen in the tourist art shops of Lhasa.

The Tibet depicted in Chen's paintings is no longer exemplary of modern Tibetan life and contemporary Tibetan artists consider this art form merely a kitsch souvenir.³⁹¹ In contradistinction to the Orientalism of the myth of Tibet, Tsewang Tashi created the *Shangri-La* series of *tableau* photographs.

³⁸⁷ Wu Hung. *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History 1970s > 2000s* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 43.

³⁸⁸ The first public exhibition of European art after the Cultural Revolution was held at the National Art Gallery in 1979. The *Nineteenth Century French Country Landscape Painting Exhibition* included works by Millet and Camille Corot (Ibid., 30). Chen Danqing cites Corot, Millet and Rembrandt as among his main influences. (Chen Danqing. "My Seven Paintings" (1981), in Wu Hung. *Contemporary Chinese art: Primary Documents*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010, 25-29), 26.

³⁸⁹ Wu. *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History 1970s > 2000s*, 44.

³⁹⁰ While the contemporary artists in Lhasa disparage this style of art, some of the artists have produced these art works to earn money (Nyandak, conversation with author, Lhasa, October, 2010).

³⁹¹ Ibid.



Figure 76. *Shangri-La No. 1*, 2008, Tsewang Tashi, digital photograph, 100 x150 cm (Red Gate Gallery)

Figure 77. *Entering the City II*, 1980, Chen Danqing, oil on canvas 78 x 63 cm (CAFA, Beijing)

Each image is a staged scene and pastiche of one of Chen's Tibetan series of paintings. *Shangri-La No. 1* (fig. 76) depicts a young Tibetan family in a modern urban street in Lhasa. It references Chen's *Entering the City (Jincheng)* (1980) (fig. 77), which also depicts a Tibetan family walking down a street thirty years earlier. In Chen's work, the characters are dressed in the customary attire of rural Tibetans. They walk past traditional low houses and the woman suckles a baby at her exposed breast. Chen exercised some artistic licence in portraying the woman breastfeeding while walking along the street, but such an arrangement of the characters supports the notion of the Tibetan nomad as being close to nature and the land – echoing the primitivist ideals in European art earlier in the century. In his essay "My Seven Paintings" Chen states that the sight of Tibetan women nursing their children left a profound impression on him and he made a number of sketches of one particular shepherdess and a mother and son, who

formed the basis for many of the female figures in his paintings.³⁹²

Whilst Chen was attempting to portray Tibetans in a dignified way and avoid the patronising depictions of the Chinese propaganda images of socialist realism, it is this romantic quality that Tashi now wants to confront.

In Tashi's version we see a young Tibetan family in a similar arrangement. However, this time the woman carries the baby on her back in a modern back-pack baby carrier. Their clothing is a mixture of Western and modern Tibetan, and the combination of style of dress was chosen by the artist to demonstrate the hybrid aspect of a modern Tibetan lifestyle.³⁹³ If this is Shangri-La, then it is just another name for the place where they live. There are no hints of a land of harmony, tranquillity, remote, secluded and idyllic. This is a place like any other, a street like any other, a young family like any other, going about their daily life.

The family are walking past a Chinese language advertisement for yak meat.³⁹⁴ The consumer culture that has been introduced into Tibet is demonstrated by this advertisement, which features a dancer in Tibetan costume of the kind usually seen in shows for mass consumption by tourists. It is the dancer in the advertisement who seems out of place and time. With regard to language, although there are a number of linguistic groups in greater China, the national language is Putonghua (common speak) Chinese. The young family's mother-tongue is Tibetan but, in a couple of years, when the boy goes to school, he will learn Chinese as his parents did. They will speak Tibetan to each other and Chinese when required. This is the Tibet in which this family now lives.

In *Shangri-La No. 2* (fig. 78) Tashi offers a pastiche of Chen's earlier work *Pilgrimage (Chaosheng)* (fig. 79), which depicts four pilgrims praying outside the

³⁹² Chen Danqing. "My Seven Paintings" (1981), in Wu Hung. *Contemporary Chinese art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010, 25–29), 26.

³⁹³ Tsewang Tashi, Conversation with author, Lhasa, 2011.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

Jokhang Temple in the main square in Lhasa, the Barkhor. The pilgrims are dressed in a rural Tibetan costume and they prostrate on prayer rugs. Behind them a sheep huddles next to the temple wall, by which Chen again shows the actors as being in harmony with nature and the land. Everyday, pilgrims and Lhasa residents pray and circumambulate the temple with their prayer beads and prayer wheels. In the past, pilgrims would walk for weeks, months, or even years, sometimes prostrating themselves the entire distance to Lhasa.



Figure 78. *Shangri-La No. 2*, 2008, Tsewang Tashi, 100 x 150 cm, (Red Gate Gallery, Beijing)

Figure 79. *Pilgrimage (Chaosheng)*, 1980, Chen Danqing (CAFA, Beijing)



Chen says that his painting “doesn’t convey the intense emotions I felt when I set eyes on the tens of thousands of pilgrims in Lhasa.”³⁹⁵ He wrote:

The spectacle of the pilgrimage is so extraordinary and rare to witness ... I kept

³⁹⁵ Chen, “My Seven Paintings,” 28.

hesitating as to whether there was a need to paint this ... If I were only trying to make known rare religious activities from this century, then documentary films or photojournalism would be much stronger mediums. Yet photographs seem to lack a certain power of expression when directed at everyday life ...³⁹⁶

Chen's ultimate objective was for the viewer to be moved by the realism and humanism of the work and to feel that: "This is life, these are human beings."³⁹⁷

However, three decades later Chen's works no longer express the realities of modern Tibet. While pilgrimage continues, the pilgrims mostly now arrive in buses, cars and trucks. The Barkhor has been paved and much of the 'old town' has been razed and replaced by a vast people's square and tourist shops in the front of the Jokhang.

In Tashi's tableau four Tibetans are shown in the same states of prostration on their prayer rugs, and wear similar costumes, headdress, jewellery, amulets and prayer beads. In the place of the sheep Tashi has placed a Chinese tourist with a camera, who kneels in to take the perfect shot of the woman at prayer; the long lens on his camera appears all the more intrusive. He wears a Tibetan cowboy hat like the one held by the pilgrim standing on the right, although the tourist's hat was probably bought in the market as a souvenir. He resembles a hunter, his quarry being the native Tibetan. On the far left stands another tourist, a European, and next to her a tour guide with her conspicuous coloured pennant. They observe the pilgrims in the same way one would observe the native fauna – they are still so as to not disturb, but are voyeuristic intruders. The group of pilgrims, however, pay no attention to the tourists. The situation of being observed and photographed while at prayer has become normalised. Although this scene has been staged by the artist,³⁹⁸ it is a familiar sight in the Barkhor and common for tourists to thrust cameras in the face of any Tibetan wearing traditional costume. As Leigh Miller

³⁹⁶ Chen Danqing, "My Seven Paintings," 27-28.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 28.

³⁹⁸ Tsewang Tashi. conversation with the author, Lhasa, 2011.

observes, the viewer of Tsewang's art work becomes complicit in the act of voyeurism.³⁹⁹

Shangri-La No.3 (fig. 80) references Chen's *The Women Washing Their Hair* (fig. 81), which depicts two Tibetan women, naked from the waist up, washing and grooming their hair. (Chen's work in turn recalls both Degas and Gauguin, in as much as the women have been captured in the moment of washing and they coalesce with nature in their semi-nakedness.) They are outdoors, in front of a low built dwelling. A male figure stands with his back to the viewer holding a water jug for the woman.



Figure 80. *Shangri-La No. 3*, 2008, Tsewang Tashi, 100 x 150 cm, (Red Gate Gallery, Beijing)



Figure 81. *The Women Washing Their Hair*, 1980, Chen Danqing, oil on canvas, 54 x 68 cm (CAFA, Beijing)

In Tashi's rendition, some young modern Tibetan women are in the process of washing and grooming their hair in similar poses to those in Chen's work. But this time they are on the footpath outside what appears to be a modern Tibetan restaurant or bar

³⁹⁹ Leigh Miller. *Contemporary Tibetan Art and Cultural Sustainability in Lhasa, Tibet* (Doctoral thesis), Emory University, Atlanta Ga. 2014, 245.

and they are using plastic stools and basins that are part of the new disposable consumer culture. A third woman sits on the left drinking a can of Coca-Cola. A male figure, again with his back to the viewer, holds a red bucket for one of the woman. In Tashi's scene the Tibetan man wears a western business suit and, incongruously, a red tasselled hair band in concession to tradition.

The scene appears to be the aftermath of a party, with beer and Coca-Cola cans scattered around and the remains of food on the table. The shop front has western Christmas decorations on the window and a Christmas tree next to the door-way juxtaposed against the Tibetan door-hanging embroidered with the auspicious infinity knot that signifies the unity and impermanence of all things. In this scene of hybrid festivity, the door-hanging and the man's hair band are the only Tibetan identifiers. The Christmas decorations are clearly western and indicate the extent to which western culture has infiltrated such geographically remote and non-Christian areas such as Tibet. Indeed, Christmas is now a regular event in many parts of China, not so much as a concession to western tourists but as merely another commercial opportunity.⁴⁰⁰ Whilst the scene does not expressly indicate the sex trade, it does suggest it. In the past few decades the sex trade has flourished in Lhasa with hundreds of brothels being opened, mainly for the Chinese army and migrant workers.⁴⁰¹

The fourth work in Tashi's photographic series, *Shangri-La No. 4* (fig. 82), references Chen's *The Shepherd* (fig. 83), a rural scene in which a Tibetan man, dressed in a *chuba*, is flirting with a Tibetan woman, from whom he is stealing a kiss, much to her amusement. In Tashi's scene a young Tibetan woman is dressed in a silver mini dress emblazoned with the logo of a Chinese beer company. She has long white boots and a shiny red belt while the man is dressed in sheep skin *chuba* with one arm and shoulder

⁴⁰⁰ Tsewang Tashi, conversation with author, Lhasa, 2011

⁴⁰¹ *Himalaya*, Michael Palin. Roadshow Entertainment, 2004.

exposed, as is the custom. However, under his traditional garb he is wearing jeans and western shoes.



Figure 82. *Shangri-La No. 4*, 2008, Tsewang Tashi, 100 x 150 cm (Red Gate Gallery, Beijing)

Figure 83. *The Shepherd*, 1980, Chen Danqing, oil on canvas, 80 x 52 cm (CAFA, Beijing)

In Chen's work, the couple stand before a low wall, beyond which stretches the vast plains of the Tibetan plateau dotted with sheep. In Tashi's work, the scene has been staged in the garden of a five star hotel in Lhasa.⁴⁰² In order to recreate an exotic Tibetan atmosphere for foreign guests, a pagoda has been installed with a golden roof suggestive of a Buddhist Temple. Some stone sheep have also been placed around to suggest an 'authentic' nomad touch, revealing the extent to which the land and natural landscape is being appropriated and industrialised.

In these scenes the artist challenges the foreigner's perception of Tibet. It is not the Tibet of the tourist brochures or the Tibet of the past, the Tibet of the imagination. Leigh Miller concludes that the settings and the relationship of the subjects to each other "serve to document a reality in the present upon which a fantasy is projected and

⁴⁰² Tsewang Tashi, conversations with author, Lhasa, 2011

staged.”⁴⁰³ Tashi recognises that the modern Tibet may not fulfil the expectations of foreign visitors who come to see the Tibetan ‘Shangri-La’. Nevertheless, in reconstructing these scenes of daily life, Tashi’s purpose is to depict what is in front of him, not, paradoxically, an artificial image.⁴⁰⁴ By parodying the romantic images of Tibet in Chinese art he brings into sharper relief the contemporary reality and exposes the illusion of the idealisation of Tibet and the evolution of its society.

Tibetan land and landscape in exile

The contemporary artists of the diaspora also address the issue of land and the landscape of Tibet in connection with their Tibetan identity. Not surprisingly, the diaspora artists connect with the land of Tibet in some ways that are different to the Lhasa artists who have not been displaced from the land of their birth or ancestry. Yet that connection is still very strong and is sometimes expressed with a sensibility of longing.

Like Gade, Gonkar Gyatso has depicted the land of Tibet as an incarnation of the Reclining Buddha. The work, *Reclining Buddha – Shanghai to Lhasa Express* (2009) (fig. 84), was first exhibited at the 53rd Venice biennale and then at the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Queensland.

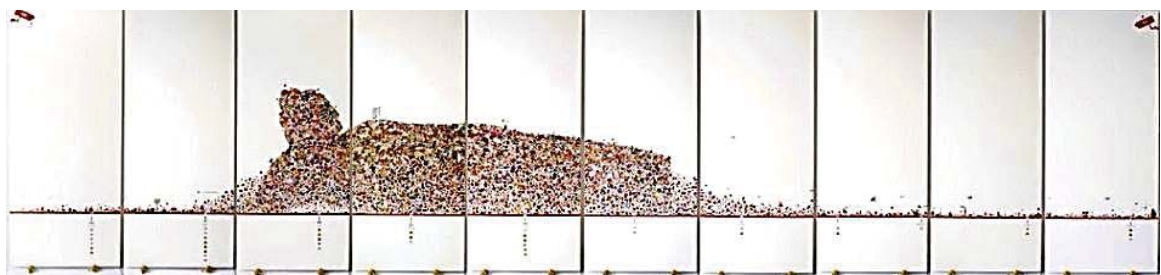


Figure 84. *Reclining Buddha – Shanghai to Lhasa Express*, 2009, Gonkar Gyatso, stickers, pencil, paper-cuts and screen prints on treated paper, 10 panels, 200 x 900 cm total (Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane)

⁴⁰³ Leigh Miller. *Contemporary Tibetan Art and Cultural Sustainability in Lhasa, Tibet* (Doctoral thesis), Emory University, Atlanta Ga. 2014, 245.

⁴⁰⁴ Tsewang Tashi, conversations with author, Lhasa 2011.

In the artist's statement on his website, Gyatso says: "Just as the identity of my motherland, Tibet, cannot be separated from religion and politics, I think my own sensibility has been shaped by the undeniable bond between the two."⁴⁰⁵

By depicting the land of Tibet in the shape of the Reclining Buddha, Gyatso refers directly to the indelible link between the country and Buddhism and the culture and people. Donald Dinwiddie proposes that by using the Reclining Buddha as the scaffold the artist is drawing an analogy to the Buddha in *parinirvāṇa*, the moment of the Buddha's death and achievement of release from the cycle of reincarnation. Dinwiddie suggests that this is the Buddha of an ending and beginning, and by analogy, an ending and beginning of Tibet.⁴⁰⁶ In other words, the old Tibet is in the state of regeneration in a new time; socially, culturally and politically.

The narrative of the work starts on the right at the point of the departure station for the China-Tibet railway. We then follow the train journey westwards to Lhasa. The stations are marked at different points along the route as the altitude rises to the Tibetan plateau (fig. 84).⁴⁰⁷ Apart from an allusion to the rising altitude, the gradual build up of the Buddha figure denotes an increasing momentum as the train moves west.

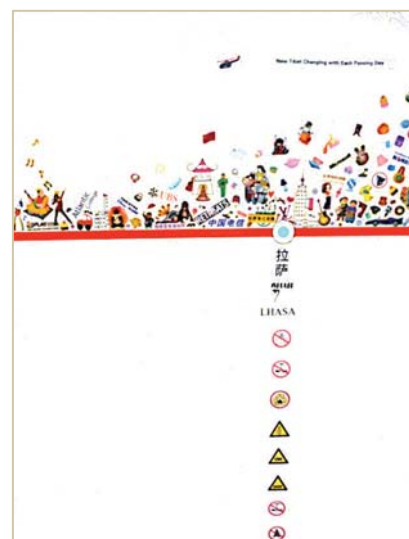
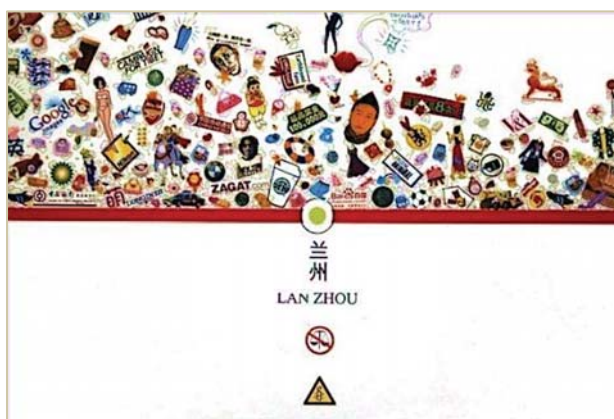


Figure 85. Figure 86. *Reclining Buddha – Shanghai to Lhasa Express* (details)

⁴⁰⁵ Gonkar Gyatso. Artist's statement. gonkargyatso.com.

⁴⁰⁶ Donald Dinwiddie. "Gonkar Gyatso - Contours of Identity." *Art Asia Pacific* (May/June 2009: 132–139), 138.

⁴⁰⁷ Gonkar Gyatso, Artist's Talk, *Asia Pacific Triennial*, Queensland Art Gallery, 6 December 2009.

Gyatso took inspiration from the commercial customer pamphlets of the new rail service to design symbols with an overtly social and political message.⁴⁰⁸ Underneath his ‘stations’ he has created symbols imitating international visual information diagrams that overcome language barriers (figs. 85, 86). At Lan Zhou station, for example, the first symbol follows a standard format of a red circle and diagonal red strike. Inside the circle is a pair of scales – the implication is “justice forbidden here.” Underneath is another symbol of a yellow triangle with black border (a colour scheme which demands attention) that contains the Amnesty International logo of a candle wound with barbed wire. The implication is that human rights are an issue here. Underneath the Lhasa station a greater number of symbols are used; indeed the further west the train travels towards Tibet, the greater is the number of injunctions. Along with the scales and Amnesty International symbols there are, for example, two other symbols of red circles cut by diagonal strikes: one contains a pair of hands joined together in symbol of prayer and the second is a human silhouette in the posture of meditation. These symbols suggest that religion, and the Buddhist religion in particular, is banned.

Figure 87. *Reclining Buddha – Shanghai to Lhasa Express* (detail)



At one point on the Buddha’s topography is an Australian Aboriginal man in a primitive state of dress holding not a spear but a Tibetan iconographic trident impaling the M&M cartoon icon (fig. 87). A speech bubble from his mouth reads: “Hi H.H. Make

⁴⁰⁸ Dinwiddie. “Gonkar Gyatso - Contours of Identity,” 138.

sure don't end up like us in your own land." The 'H.H.' refers to 'His Holiness', the honorific title of the Dalai Lama. An analogy is being drawn between the indigenous peoples of Australia and Tibet who have both been marginalised by the occupation of their land by foreign powers and the influx of alien peoples and ideas.

Gyatso also wanted to express some of the impressions he gained from taking the rail journey himself in 2008. This was a nostalgic journey for Gyatso. For many years he had not been able to return to the land of his birth because it is very difficult for an exiled Tibetan to re-enter Tibet. However, with the acquisition of a British passport, he was able to travel to China and take the train to Lhasa. This new route and mode of transport provided views of the landscape not previously seen. Gyatso speaks of the North Western part of Tibet as being a vast land, 'a no-man's land', as the train speeds past vistas of distant snow mountains. Gyatso attempts to bring these impressions of North West Tibet to the work. On the far left of the work the built up image recedes, which Gyatso says represents the untouched landscape of this remote region where there are no people, only wildlife.⁴⁰⁹

While most Chinese cities are choked with people, cars, pollution, skyscrapers and commerce, the sparsely populated area of Tibet provides space and the prospect of riches to support China's economic growth.⁴¹⁰ The railway forms part of China's policy to modernise Tibet; to promote urbanisation and industry intended to have trickle-down economic effects on rural areas.⁴¹¹ However, the concerns for Tibetans are that the influx of Chinese workers will result in overcrowding, increased crime and Tibetans being unable to compete for jobs. While the Chinese feel that great social and economic progress has been made, some Tibetans feel differently, that development projects like the

⁴⁰⁹ G. Gyatso, Artist's Talk, *Asia Pacific Triennial*, 2009.

⁴¹⁰ Lustgarten, *China's Great Train*, 65.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

railway will result in further marginalisation for Tibetans.⁴¹² On the Buddha's shoulder (figs. 88, 89) is a collection of sign-posts which collectively read: "Choose the Right direction?" The signage indicates a moral choice rather than merely compass points and is suggestive of the labyrinth of political, social and consumer choices that must be navigated in a globalised world.



Figure 88, Figure 89. *Reclining Buddha – Shanghai to Lhasa Express* (detail)

However, while Gyatso expresses concern about the impact of globalisation and commercialisation on Tibet, he also recognizes that the new train has brought benefits as well.⁴¹³ Indeed, it has allowed him to travel through the country of his birth, opening up new vistas to drink in en route. As Simon White points out, we sense the ambivalence in Gyatso's work.⁴¹⁴

Gyatso strives to show that the personal and the social are necessarily entwined. Because a work of art is always interconnected with its social and political environment, he believes that artists can create original statements by actively incorporating elements from their society into their art. In the catalogue essay for his *Three Realms* exhibition in Brisbane, Savita Apte says that "[b]y accepting his historical moment, Gyatso creates images of lasting importance that have their own intensity and their own moment."⁴¹⁵

⁴¹² Lustgarten. *China's Great Train*, 119.

⁴¹³ G. Gyatso, Artist's Talk, *Asia Pacific Triennial*, 2009.

⁴¹⁴ Simon Wright. "Gonkar's Pop Candy." *Gonkar Gyatso: Three Realms*, exhibition catalogue (Brisbane: Griffith University Art Gallery, University of Queensland Art Museum, 2012, 26–33), 31.

⁴¹⁵ Savita Apte. "Gonkar Gyatso: Disconnected, Displaced, Dispossessed, and Still Reaching for the Sky." *Gonkar Gyatso: Three Realms*, exhibition catalogue (4–9).

While Gyatso's work has most relevance for his native land of Tibet, it also has a broader message regarding globalisation.

Two exile artists who have taken a different approach to the idea of connection with the land as part of Tibetan identity are Kesang Lamdark and Tenzing Rigdol.

As part of the Outdoor Special Projects component of the 2008 Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair, Kesang Lamdark erected a 10,000 kilogram Tibetan boulder in the grounds of the Shanghai Exhibition Centre. The artist arranged for the boulder to be brought from Tibet by truck to the site in Shanghai. The popular Buddhist *mantra* "*Om mani padme hum*"⁴¹⁶ was carved into the rock and it was then covered in a pink plastic sheet which was melted with a heat gun. The result is *Pink Himalayan Boulder* (fig. 90).



Figure 90. *Pink Himalayan Boulder*, 2008, Kesang Lamdark, boulder and melted plastic (Shanghai Exhibition Centre)

H.G. Masters calls the work a "brutally iconic monument,"⁴¹⁷ but he does not expound on this. Certainly the scale of the work and the solidity of the stone are

⁴¹⁶ *Om mani padme hum* (jewel in the lotus) is the *mantra* of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteśvara (Chenrezig). As mentioned in Chapter Three, *mani* stones are engraved with this *mantra* and left in certain places by pilgrims and travellers after making their invocation to the deity who protects them from danger (Tucci. *Tibet, Land of Snows*, 155, 159.)

⁴¹⁷ H.G. Masters. "Kesang Lamdark, Where I work," *ArtAsiaPacific* (Issue 90, Sep/Oct 2014), <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/90/KesangLamdark>.

monumental, as are the Himalayas. Although the stone is not technically from the iconic Himalayas but another mountain range further north, the Himalayas are synonymous with Tibet. By using the appellation ‘Himalayan’ in the title, the work becomes a symbol of the land of Tibet without explicitly stating the brutal truths. The boulder had to be smuggled from a part of Eastern Tibet which is now included in Sichuan Province, an endeavour made more dangerous because of the ongoing precarious political situation regarding Tibet’s status within China. A work was entitled ‘*Tibetan*’ *Boulder* would simply be asking for trouble. As Lamdark explains:

The origin of the PHM [*Pink Himalayan Boulder*] is in Garze (Ganzi). Garze is my fathers hometown in East Tibet. The Garze area is under heavy military control. So the uploading on the truck had to take place at night time. The truck got to a police control in Luho (next town). They asked “what are you doing with the boulder? Its forbidden to bring a boulder from Tibet to China.” A baksih⁴¹⁸ [*sic*] solved the problem. ...⁴¹⁹



Figure 91. *Pink Himalayan Boulder*, 2008
(detail)

Then there was also the matter of the Shanghai Contemporary 08 censorship board who questioned the meaning the engraving on the stone boulder (fig. 91). As Lamdark

⁴¹⁸ *Bakshish* or *baksheesh* is a gratuity or bribe.

⁴¹⁹ Kesang Lamdark. “ShContemporary08.” <http://lamdark.com/shock.html> (under “Galleries”).

recounts, the driver who delivered the boulder told the authorities that the words were an old Chinese prayer written in the Tibetan language.⁴²⁰ In fact, the engraving of the *mantra* “*Om mani padme hum*” transforms the rock into a traditional Tibetan *mani* stone. In Lamdark’s own words:

“*Om* ‘jewel in the lotus’” is an attempted free translation of this prayer. The ‘jewel’ symbolizes the active male principle in creation and at the same time signifies the ‘path’ that can be described as ‘loving kindness’. The ‘lotus’ symbolizes the passive female cosmic principle and signifies ‘the highest wisdom’. Together they represent the fulfilment of the teachings.⁴²¹

By engraving the boulder with the *mantra*, Lamdark achieves the dual purpose of making a Buddhist or spiritual offering of his work, and stamping the work again as a symbol of Tibetan identity. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Lamdark says that the rock symbolises the Himalayas, the plastic the West and pink the colour of the artist. It is as if Lamdark is wrapping himself around the boulder; although he lives in the West, his intrinsic affinity is with the land of Tibet.

Tenzing Rigdol is another exile artist who has also explored the concept of identification in the land and the earth. In October 2011, he erected a site-specific installation in Dharamsala, India. The work, entitled *Our Land Our People* (fig. 92), took seventeen months to bring to fulfilment and comprised twenty-two tons of soil which had been transported from the Tibetan town of Shigatse in trucks through Nepal to India. Rigdol’s journey to create this installation was recorded as a documentary film called *Bringing Tibet Home*, directed by Rigdol’s friend and compatriot, Tenzin Tsetan Choklay.

⁴²⁰ Kesang Lamdark. “ShContemporary08.” http://lamdark.com/gall_shanghai_08.swf.

⁴²¹ Ibid.



Figure 92. *Our Land Our People*, Tenzing Rigdol, October 2011, site specific installation, Dharamsala, India, soil from Tibet, 13 x 13 m. Photograph by Bhuchung D. Sonam (Rossi & Rossi, London)

Rigdol spread the native soil over a forty-three foot square stage and invited Tibetans in Dharamsala to walk on the earth, to write on it or to express their thoughts and emotions at a microphone.⁴²² The installation only lasted a few days and at the conclusion the viewers and participants were allowed to take some of the soil with them as a reminder of their ancestral and cultural homeland. Rigdol also presented a tray of soil to the Dalai Lama who wrote in it the word Tibet in Tibetan script.

In creating this artwork, Rigdol was inspired by his late father's unfulfilled wish to see Tibet one more time.⁴²³ He says:

... I realised that there are many Tibetans like my father who couldn't go back to Tibet due to the political reasons and then I thought maybe I could bring Tibet or a small part of Tibet to them ... I made plans to transport 20,000 kilograms of soil from Tibet to India, through Nepal. And the journey was a bit difficult and dangerous one and altogether it took me about seventeen months and after crossing

⁴²² Tenzing Rigdol and Tenzin Tsetan Choklay. *Bringing Tibet Home*. "The Artwork." www.bringingtibethome.com/artwork/.

⁴²³ Tenzing Rigdol, "Reimagining the Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Traditions: A Conversation." Panel discussion. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 7 March 2014 (metmuseum.org).

more than fifty checkpoints and border securities I managed to get the soil into Dharamsala ... I made a three-dimensional sculpture of a Tibetan flag which also looked like a stage and laid the 20,000 kilograms of soil on top of it and had people walk on it. And I also had a standing microphone in which they could say and share whatever they feel while they were standing on the Tibetan soil.⁴²⁴

Dharamsala was chosen because, as Rigdol says, it is now a special place for Tibetans. The Tibetan government in exile is located there as well as the residence of the Dalai Lama.⁴²⁵ Because the majority of Tibetans in exile live in and around Dharamsala it is there the work has the greatest real impact on Tibetan people as an interactive art work. As Rigdol says:

There are many like my father, I think, who wanted to go back to Tibet. But then I don't want to equate the soil that I've brought as Tibet. But then I think once they get on the soil it might somehow give them the idea of what they might feel in a bigger proportion when they really go back in Tibet.⁴²⁶

While Rigdol says that he does not equate a quantity of soil with Tibet itself, the fact that the artists are motivated and inspired by the physical earth of Tibet shows that the affinity with the homeland is almost tangible. This affinity was shared by the Tibetans in Dharamsala, many of whom were moved to tears by Rigdol's installation.⁴²⁷

For the Tibetans in exile, it seems, contact with a physical piece of the land evokes a longing, not just out of nostalgia, but for a part of themselves that is missing. The land is part of their identity and without it they are not quite whole. Tibetans in exile live in alien environments, whether it be Dharamsala, or the United States (in Rigdol's case) or Switzerland (in Lamdark's case). Even for those who were born outside Tibet, as Tenzing Rigdol was, the piece of native rock or soil expresses: this is me, this is where I come

⁴²⁴ Rigdol, "Reimagining the Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Traditions: A Conversation."

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Tenzing Rigdol. In *Bringing Tibet Home*, directed by Tenzin Tsetan Choklay, 2013.

⁴²⁷ *Bringing Tibet Home*, Tenzin Tsetan Choklay, 2013.

from. Note that Rigdol says “when” not “if” the Tibetans in Dharamsala go back to Tibet, indicating that Tibet will always be considered home for the exiles.

Yet the Tibet portrayed by the artists in Lhasa is not one that these Tibetans exiles would be familiar with. Although they don’t realise it, Tibet is now an alien place, one which the Lhasan artists have evolved with. Ironically, for many exiles, Tibet has now become their unreachable Shangri-La.



Figure 93, Figure 94, Figure 95, Figure 96, Figure 97, Figure 98, *Our Land Our People*, Tenzin Rigdol, 2011, (*Bringing Tibet Home*, directed by Tenzin Tsetan Choklay, 2013)

In this chapter I have examined the way in which the iconography of Tibetan geography and landscape is reinterpreted in contemporary Tibetan art. The artists draw from artistic traditions and folklore and use these devices to engage with themes of land and myth to articulate modern socio-political realities surrounding identity and self-determination. They reinterpret traditions by anthropomorphising the land of Tibet and address global issues as well as issues that affect the land of Tibet. They use a number of mediums and techniques from traditional paper and pigments to installations made from rock and soil to challenge perceptions of Tibet and Tibetanness and present a vision of a society in a state of transition, displaced affected by myriad influences of globalisation. In these different ways, the artists deconstruct and reconstruct artistic traditions and reclaim ownership of the visual depiction of Tibet and Tibetan identity.

Chapter 5. A New Aniconism – Allegory

So far I have examined the reinterpretation by Tibetan contemporary artists of iconic elements of Tibetan visual culture; the figurative elements and depictions of the Buddha and deities, and use of traditional Tibetan iconography. We have seen that traditional Tibetan art is underpinned by philosophical concepts portrayed in narrative and allegorical ways. In this chapter I will consider works that draw on Buddhist concepts without portraying the deities usually depicted in traditional Tibetan art. I draw an analogy between these works and the aniconic Buddhist art which, it is generally believed, preceded the development of the anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha figure in the second century CE.

As Klemens Karlsson explains it, while aniconic art can just mean non-figurative art, in traditional Buddhist art it refers to the absence of the Buddha in human form, but otherwise the art is fully figurative.⁴²⁸ According to Karlsson there was a transformation of aniconic art consisting of auspicious signs into Buddhist aniconic art. These auspicious signs, such as the wheel (*cakra*; *khor-lo* in Tibetan), footprints (*buddhapāda*) (fig. 99), sacred trees, and lotus flowers, were transformed into compositions representing the Buddha in a narrative context without representing his human form.⁴²⁹

Figure 99. *Buddhapāda* (Buddha's footprints) with *Dharmacakra* (wheel of law), *svastika* and other auspicious symbols, stone bas-relief, 2nd century C.E., Amarāvātī, India, (Government Museum, Madras, India)



⁴²⁸ Klemens Karlsson. *Face to Face with the Absent Buddha, the formation of Buddhist Aniconic Art* (Doctoral thesis) Uppsala University, Stockholm, 2000, 19.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 167 & 193.

In this chapter I propose that the Tibetan contemporary artists continue the practice of aniconism from traditional Tibetan Buddhist art. This practice results in works that express Buddhist metaphysical and philosophical concepts without however, making direct reference to any of the Buddhist deities. Using a range of different mediums and techniques, the works are sometimes abstract, sometimes figurative, and synthesise the ideas of Western conceptual art. Yet the ideas expressed in metaphorical or allegorical ways, are rooted in Buddhist and Tibetan culture. While the exile artists often use these symbols to explore the vicissitudes of a hybrid life in the West, the Lhasan artists create hybrid allegories representing the erosion of Tibetan culture.

Aniconic Art in Exile – Conceptual Art



Figure 100. *My Exilic Experience*, 2011, Tenzing Rigdol, subway maps, fabrics and scriptures, Two panels 91.5 x 61 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

In the work *My Exilic Experience* (fig. 100), Tenzing Rigdol references the *buddhapāda* to engage with issues of identity as a Tibetan in exile. Rigdol utilises his familiar collage techniques combining Tibetan scriptures and brocade fabric. The work incorporates the symbol of the footprint as a cultural symbol of Tibetan identity. Rigdol

has fashioned the brocade fabric and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority subway map of New York to form footprints. The background is completely covered with Tibetan scriptures and, as mentioned in Chapter Three, Rigdol uses the Tibetan script as a sign of Tibetan identity, a written language that unites Tibetans.⁴³⁰

According to the aniconic theory of early Buddhist art, the footprints of the Buddha were used to symbolise the presence of the historical Buddha in a visual narrative.⁴³¹ Buddhist legend tells that shortly before the Buddha died, he went to Kusinara in India and stood upon a stone with his face to the south. He is said to have left an impression of his feet on the stone as a souvenir to posterity.⁴³² David Snellgrove says that footprints were originally used in Buddhist art to indicate the Buddha's personal presence in biographical or legendary scenes but soon became independent cult objects.⁴³³ Certainly the symbol is ubiquitous and found all over the Buddhist world, from Sri Lanka to Tibet. We can find the use of footprints to represent the historical Buddha in Tibetan *thangkas* that date from at least the tenth or eleventh century.⁴³⁴ In Tibetan traditional art the footprint motif has not only been used to denote the presence of the Buddha but also certain revered lamas.⁴³⁵ It is understood that the footprint of a lama stamped with the *cakra* symbol indicates the lama's Buddha nature.⁴³⁶ As Amy Heller states, "... it is as if the person is there. By placing the footprints, it is the presence of the lama himself."⁴³⁷

In Rigdol's work the footprint, while alluding to the *buddhapāda*, is about himself and his own journey. He says: "The map questions my journey as a Tibetan living away

⁴³⁰ Dhondup Tashi Rekjong. "The New Face of Tibet," *Darkness into Beauty* exhibition catalogue (London: Rossi & Rossi, May 2013).

⁴³¹ David L. Snellgrove. *The Image of the Buddha* (Paris and Tokyo: Kodansha International/Unesco, 1978), 43). See also Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 50.

⁴³² Meher McArthur, *Reading Buddhist Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 121.

⁴³³ Snellgrove. *The Image of the Buddha*.

⁴³⁴ Pratapaditya Pal. *Art of the Himalayas* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1991), 142.

⁴³⁵ Amy Heller. *Tibetan Art* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1999) 84, and Pal, *Art of the Himalayas*, 174.

⁴³⁶ Pal, *Art of the Himalayas* 174; and Rhie and Thurman, *The Sacred Art of Tibet*, 250.

⁴³⁷ Heller. *Tibetan Art*, 84.

from his occupied country.”⁴³⁸ Rigdol has lived in New York for a number of years now and it has become a formative place in his journey as an artist and a person. However, he remembers feeling very nervous when his uncle first taught him to navigate New York’s subway system.⁴³⁹ He has used maps in a number of his collage works and they represent, not only his negotiation of the space in which he lives, but also the ongoing negotiation of the metaphysical space of his life and his identity as a Tibetan in exile. The footprints indicate ‘presence’, like the footprints of lamas on traditional *thangkas*. In this case, it is the artist’s own presence.

Rigdol’s work, *My Exilic Experience*, represents his early attempts to come to terms with the new and complicated social rituals and technologies of the West. The subway map is representative of the larger journey taken by Rigdol and other members of the Tibetan diaspora, as well as the daily negotiation of New York city. Losang Gyatso, who is another artist living in the United States and has collaborated with Tenzing Gyatso on art projects, has articulated the process of negotiating one’s identity. He believes Tibetans are:

... negotiating our own identities, finding, negotiating the changes happening to Tibetan society inside Tibet and outside Tibet we’re all living, no matter where we are in the world, we’re negotiating our own identities and I think art and literature, films, can play a very productive creative role in creating spaces that don’t exist in reality but spaces for us to consider and then can choose whether to subscribe to them or not.⁴⁴⁰

In terms of Homi Bhabha’s hybridity theory, these are the ‘in-between spaces’ and borderline engagements of cultural difference that challenge our definitions of tradition

⁴³⁸ Tenzing Rigdol. “Art. New Occupation,” by Zeenat Nagree, *Mumbai Time Out*, 18–31 March, 2011, 76.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Losang Gyatso. Interview by Sominetta Ronconi. *Tibet Art Now (TAN)* exhibition, Amsterdam, June 2009. www.tibetartmovement.com/tan/interview.htm.

and modernity.⁴⁴¹ These contemporary Tibetan artists are working at the boundaries of both Tibetan and Western culture. They inhabit the spaces where they must reconcile their ethnic roots and cultural traditions with another culture and other traditions. They go from being neither one nor the other to both; keeping, and at the same time, dispelling otherness. For Bhabha, the social articulation of difference for cultural sub-groups, is a complex on-going negotiation through which cultural hybridities emerge.⁴⁴² Bhabha presupposes that there has already been a move away from classification based on single essential characteristics, and toward myriad contextual circumstances and histories “that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world.”⁴⁴³ The traditional component is only a partial form of identification. In this context, by reiterating traditions, such as traditional art forms and iconography, new cultural temporalities are introduced into the invention of tradition. By reconstructing Tibetan iconography, artistic traditions are reinscribed. The traditions are extended, new meanings are added, and the visual language endures, translated into a new era.

My Exilic Experience is not only a conceptual synthesis of metaphors from Tibetan tradition and Western modernity. The synthesis extends to his materials. Rigdol’s use of the brocade fabric, which we see in many of his paintings, is not a merely aesthetic device. Brocade and other rich fabrics have long played an important role in Tibetan visual culture and religious life, including for robes, drapery and *thangkas* made from appliqué and embroidery.⁴⁴⁴ Rigdol fuses the traditional Tibetan *thangka* materials with modern Western art techniques and images to express the artist’s own hybrid identity and the metaphysical road travelled from Tibet to the West. He draws on the age-old aniconic device of the *buddhapāda* footprint, which could be said to carry his genetic code. But

⁴⁴¹ Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1995,) 1–2.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 2.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁴⁴ Valrae Reynolds. “Ritual Textiles,” in *Art of the Himalayas* by Pratapaditya Pal, 106; and Tenzin Gyltzen Ghadong, interview with author (Palpung Sherabling Monastery, India, 17 November 2010).

this is only his partial identity. Another, equally important part, on which his identity is charted, is the map of New York.

Kesang Lamdark has also experimented with aniconic symbols of Buddhist art. Just as he reinterpreted Buddhist deities in works such *Pink Tara* and *Blue Tara*, Lamdark reinterprets aniconic Buddhist iconography using modern materials and techniques as well as modern Western art ideas, particularly in his series of *Wheel* sculptures.

The wheel is another important aniconic symbol from early Buddhist art. It is one of the eight sacred symbols associated with the Buddha and is often found painted on the door and gates of Tibetan monasteries.⁴⁴⁵ It refers to the Buddha's first sermon or discourse at Deer Park in Sarnath, India. This sermon, considered to be the third great event of the Buddha's career after his birth and enlightenment, is referred to as the first turning of the wheel of the law (*dharma*). As an architectural ornament, the Wheel of Law is almost always shown in Tibet flanked by two deer-like animals recalling the sermon in the Deer Park⁴⁴⁶ (fig. 101).



Figure 101. Dharma wheel flanked by deer, c. 14th century, Jokhang Temple, Lhasa (Larsen & Sinding-Larsen, *The Lhasa Atlas*. 2001, 114–115.)



Figure 102. Limestone relief with *dharmacakra*, 2nd century C.E., Amarāvati, India (Doris Weiner Collection, New York)

⁴⁴⁵ Pal, *Art of the Himalayas*, 184.

⁴⁴⁶ Valrae Reynolds, *From the Sacred Realm, Treasures of Tibetan Art from The Newark Museum* (Munich: Prestel, 1999), 254

The wheel was originally the symbol of the universal ruler (*cakravartin* – ‘he who sets the wheel in motion’) and, by analogy, associated with the Buddha as the spiritual universal ruler. It is found engraved on depictions of the hand and footprints of the Buddha, as marks that denote his identity as a *cakravartin*.⁴⁴⁷ In early Indian iconography the wheel is found atop columns, for example, or above an empty throne surrounded by worshippers or flanked by deer, or on a lotus pedestal and encircled by a halo⁴⁴⁸ (fig. 102). As Buddhism developed and spread across Asia, the wheel came to symbolise the Buddhist doctrine in general. The Tibetan wheel retains its significance as an emblem of sovereignty and is thus associated with the empowerment of important lamas such as the Dalai Lama.⁴⁴⁹ Its component parts also have their own symbolic meaning. The hub of the wheel represents training in moral discipline, the spokes stand for the application of wisdom in regard to emptiness with which ignorance is dispelled, and the rim denotes training in concentration.⁴⁵⁰

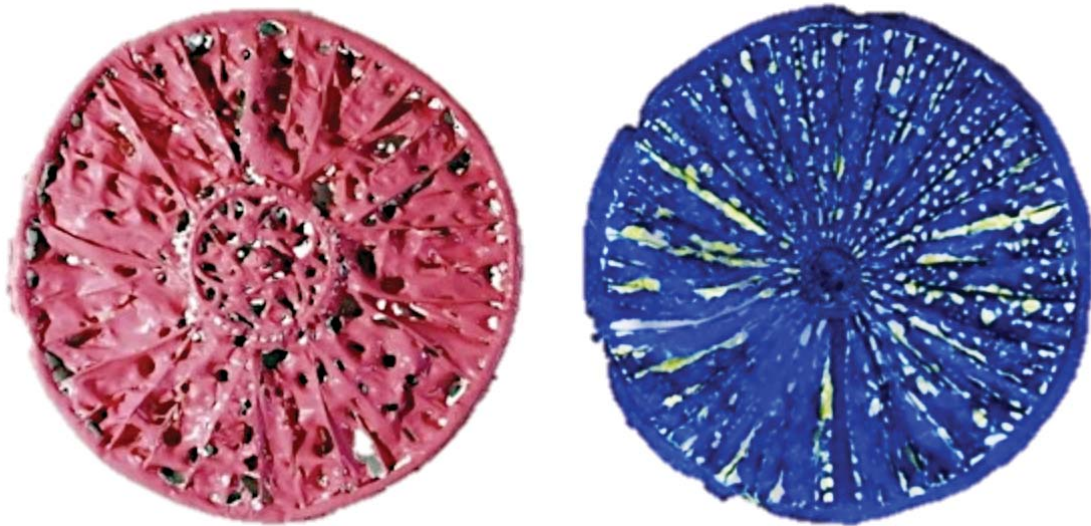


Figure 103, Figure 104. *Wheel (Pink)* 2010, *Wheel (Blue)* 2011, Kesang Lamdark, plastic, bicycle wheel, 123 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

⁴⁴⁷ David L. Snellgrove. *The Image of the Buddha* (Paris and Tokyo: Kodansha International/Unesco, 1978), 51; and Reynolds, *From the Sacred Realm*.

⁴⁴⁸ Snellgrove, *The Image of the Buddha*, 33, 417.

⁴⁴⁹ Reynolds, *From the Sacred Realm*.

⁴⁵⁰ Loden Sherap Daggyab Rinpoche. *Buddhist Symbols in Tibetan Culture* (trans. Maurice Walshe) (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 30.

In his works *Wheel*, 2010 and 2011 (figs. 103, 104), Lamdark has juxtaposed the Dada concept of the ‘ready-made’ referencing Duchamp’s work *The Bicycle Wheel*, with the seemingly contradictory concept of Buddhist symbolism.

The wheel is the most ubiquitous of Buddhist symbols, occurring in varied contexts from the ornamental to the iconographic. It is symbolic of the *dharma*, the cycle of life or *samsāra*, continuous change, rotation of the world, and absolute completeness.⁴⁵¹ It is, therefore, loaded with meaning. Conversely, the ready-made in Duchamp’s art involves neutrality, banality and lack of meaning. Duchamp selected the wheel as an act of “visual indifference”⁴⁵² in a gesture designed to challenge the sanctity of art. Yet while these two different uses of the ‘wheel’ seem to be diametrically opposed, there are interesting convergences between them.

According to Octavio Paz: “[t]he practice of the ‘ready-made’ demands absolute disinterest.”⁴⁵³ For him the ready-made is not only a semantic game, but also an ascetic exercise, a means of purification and its goal is non-contemplation.⁴⁵⁴ Paz suggests the ready-made is not an artistic act but an ‘art’ of interior liberation. Interestingly, Paz invokes the Buddhist ‘Perfection of Wisdom’ *sūtra* and its concept of ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*). ‘Emptiness’, he says, is what Duchamp calls the beauty of indifference and what Paz himself sees as “freedom.”⁴⁵⁵

While Lamdark’s *Wheel* can be seen as a homage to Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), Lamdark does not portray the wheel as a neutral object but imbues it with iconographic and philosophical significance. Lamdark’s anti-art tendency is directed at

⁴⁵¹ Loden Sherap Dagab Rinpoche. *Buddhist Symbols in Tibetan Culture*. Trans. Maurice Walshe (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 31.

⁴⁵² Marcel Duchamp. “Ready-Mades.” In *Dada, art and anti-art* by Hans Richter (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1965), 89.

⁴⁵³ Octavio Paz. “The Ready-Made.” In *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective*, edited by Joseph Masheck (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975, 84–89), 88.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

the rejection of the traditional rules of design and construction, and the conventional preciousness of the medium in Tibetan Buddhist art. It is a *cakra* deconstructed, stripped of all decoration and context.

In keeping with his art practice Lamdark melds incongruous mediums and materials by coating the wheel frame in melted plastic of Yves Klein Blue and Hot Pink. It is the synthetic medium of a modern, consumer, throw-away culture. Maxwell Heller suggests that the treatment with plastic and colour turns the bicycle wheels into dazzling pop-art *maṇḍalas* which degrade a sacred image at the same time as elevating a discarded wheel, and turns religious objects into toys.⁴⁵⁶

However, as we saw with regard to the *Pink* and *Blue Taras*, the nature of the medium is not necessarily the best indicator of importance of a work. Even though traditional religious artworks are indeed usually made of precious materials, for Lamdark, an artwork is really only made precious by the user or worshipper.⁴⁵⁷ Even if a statue is made of gold, it is only a hunk of metal without the value placed on it by the viewer. It is only a matter of perception. In the case of the ‘ready-mades’, although they consist of mundane objects, their value and importance are immediately elevated by the act of designating them as art and placing them in a museum or gallery. While the gallery or museum audience does not necessarily worship the objects of art, they are there to admire them and to be lifted temporarily from the mundanity of their own lives while they are inspired by beauty or contemplate the higher questions posed by art.

Lamdak repeats the gesture of the ‘ready-made’ with an entirely found object in the form of a ragged umbrella, which invokes the Buddhist iconography of the parasol (*chatra*) representing nobility of birth and protection. People of wealth and high rank

⁴⁵⁶ Maxwell Heller. “Grave Sarcasm: The Work of Kesang Lamdark.” In *Kesang Lamdark, Son of a Rimpoche* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2011, 5–16), 10.

⁴⁵⁷ Kesang Lamdark. “The World According to Kesang; Kesang Lamdark in conversation with Elaine W. Ng.” In *Plastic Karma* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2008, 6–9), 9.

were protected against rain and sun with parasols which were usually carried by servants, or in the case of an important lama, by monks of a lower order.⁴⁵⁸ This symbol is also associated with the Buddha in aniconic Buddhist art. We can see, for example in a second century limestone relief from the Amarāvātī Stupa in India (fig. 105), the parasol suspended over a throne under a Boddhi tree. The throne, tree and parasol all, separately and collectively, represent the Buddha. The Boddhi tree alludes to the circumstance of his enlightenment, and the throne and parasol point to the exalted status of the Buddha and his doctrine. The parasol further represents protection from evil.⁴⁵⁹

Figure 105. Parasol, throne, *boddhi* tree and footprints, representing the Buddha. 2nd century C.E. Limestone bas relief, from Amarāvātī Stupa, Andhra Pradesh, India. (British Museum, London)



Figure 106. *Umbrella*, 2011, Kesang Lamdark, umbrella and plastic, 112 x 90 x 70 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

⁴⁵⁸ Meher McArthur, *Reading Buddhist Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 119.

⁴⁵⁹ Bunce. *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 23, 59, 105.

In Lamdark's *Umbrella* (fig. 106) aesthetics and form are subordinated to the idea, and even the most humble of materials may support a philosophical concept. In the end, Lamdark detaches from and is disinterested in the preciousness of materials. Because all phenomena are 'empty' in Buddhist thought, the nature of the object is irrelevant, their essence is the same.

As we have seen in earlier chapters, Lamdark continually seeks to experiment with seemingly incongruous materials and techniques. His works, which he likens to "little shrines,"⁴⁶⁰ mark his life journey which is itself an incongruous mix of influences and experiences of places and cultures. His work can be seen as an unlikely hybrid of Dada and Buddhist philosophy, yet it is perhaps not as unlikely as it would first seem.

Another artist who has reinterpreted the auspicious symbol of the parasol or umbrella is Palden Weinreb. In many ways his work represents a significant departure from most of the works examined here. Weinreb is one of the few contemporary Tibetan artists to work in a much more abstract art style. However, Weinreb's art practice also engages with his cultural and religious heritage.

Weinreb was born in 1982 in New York to a mother who was one of the first Tibetans to be granted asylum in the city and a Jewish-American father who had embraced Tibetan Buddhism. He is thus of the second-generation of Tibetan exiles, born outside Tibet in a city which is an icon of Western modernity in terms of art, cultural diversity and human endeavour. Weinreb graduated from Skidmore College in 2004 with a degree in studio art. He employs modern technology and electronic medium combined with conventional materials to produce abstract work.

Weinreb's journey is a true hybrid one. He is a product of two diasporas yet at home in a dynamic Western society. Although his work is abstract and has reached a

⁴⁶⁰ Kesang Lamdark. "The World According to Kesang; Kesang Lamdark in conversation with Elaine W. Ng." In *Plastic Karma* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2008, 6–9), 9.

stage far beyond the imagery of Tibetan traditions, nevertheless his art practice draws from his Tibetan collective consciousness.

Weinreb uses such mediums as graphite and encaustic on paper or board, plexiglass, silverpoint and lithograph, as well as light sources. He utilises digital tools to produce harmonious abstract works of line and contour. The form of *Untitled (Parasol)*, 2007 (fig. 107), seems to hover in space. Its organic shape seems to contain life. It pulses and floats in an oceanic void like a jellyfish.

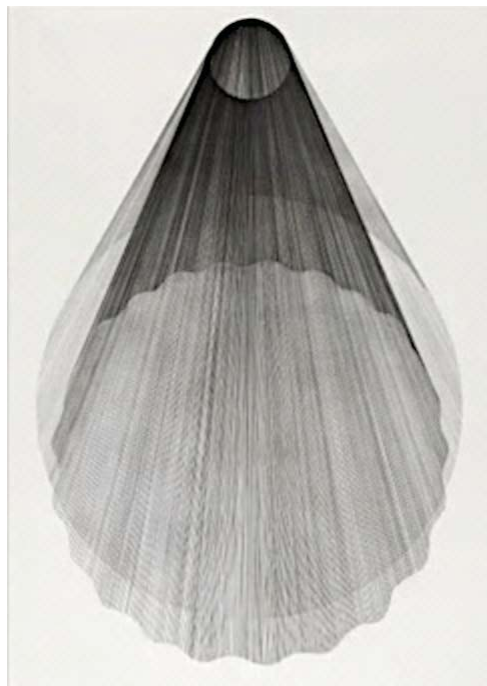


Figure 107. *Untitled (Parasol)* 2007, Palden Weinreb, lithograph, 112 x 71 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

At first glance Weinreb's work appears to consist totally of geometric abstraction, an exploration of the harmony of line, and does not seem to possess any of the features one would normally identify with Tibetan art, traditional or contemporary. Nevertheless, according to the artist, his Tibetanness and Tibetan Buddhism play important roles in his work:

While trying to find my voice as an artist, I was frustrated, both by my struggle to identify that voice, and because my efforts in finding it did not gain direction. I decided to stop forcing myself toward a false creativity, and to let go of my preconceived notions of what creation is. I was dealing with Buddhist themes at the time - absolving oneself of samsara; losing a sense of desire in a culture

dependant upon it; attaining nothingness. As I lost faith in my understanding of creation, one day I began a series of work out of sheer desperation. I began to recite a mantra. Recording my meditation in a continuous motion, I moved my pencil in accordance with the syllables I recited. Reaching a meditative state, I was able to clear my mind of everything. What I was left with was a path drawn to that state, essentially a path to nothingness.⁴⁶¹

Weinreb's words resonate strongly with the traditional Tantric texts in the sense of contemplation of the void (nothingness or 'emptiness') and creation, the essence of the universe, *saṃsāra* and meditation on a *mantra*. Looking closely at Weinreb's work we identify the hypnotic intoning of a *mantra* at work. The works themselves become a kind of *maṇḍala*, built up of a *mantra* chanted over thousands of times until it becomes wholly subsumed in the emerging forms. The process and purpose for the practitioner to intone various *mantras*, or seed syllables, is described in the Tantras, for example: "In his own heart he imagines the syllable RAM and a solar disk arising from it, and then upon that syllable HŪM, the nature of which is Wisdom and Means."⁴⁶²

It appears as though Weinreb has captured the essence of the creative process, not by conscious thought or deliberate action but by direct communication with the inner void inside his heart or consciousness, and the drawings are a recording of his meditation. In the catalogue essay for Weinreb's 2010 exhibition *The World is Flat*, H.G. Masters says that Weinreb's works need to be viewed patiently and repeatedly.⁴⁶³ By taking time over these works one can allow oneself to be absorbed into the subtle constructions and gradations until viewing the works becomes a *mantra* to the viewer. The *mantra* transfers from artist to viewer via the work of art.

⁴⁶¹ Palden Weinreb. "Palden Weinreb (artist's statement)." *Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art*. www.mechak.org/palden_weinreb_portfolio.html.

⁴⁶² *Hevajra Tantra*, Part I, Chapter iii, verse 5.

⁴⁶³ H.G. Masters. "Catalogue Essay." In *This World is Flat*, Palden Weinreb (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2010, 7–11), 8.

Masters states that Weinreb's works are "primarily concerned with the subtle construction of optical space by the gradation or absence of lines and the formal play of repeating shapes."⁴⁶⁴ Weinreb creates the illusion not only of three-dimensional space but also of movement, for example in the works *Flow* (fig. 108). Like a *mantra* that flows through the imagined channels of the mind or body, Weinreb's drawings seem to breathe in and out, and the air or space seems to flow like a ribbon of water, endlessly, this way and that, with no beginning or end. The gradations of the lines form organic shapes which ripple in their fluidity. They are as hypnotic and demulcent as the repeated syllables of a *mantra*.

Figure 108. *Flow*, 2011, Palden Weinreb, graphite on paper, 152.5 x 101.5 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

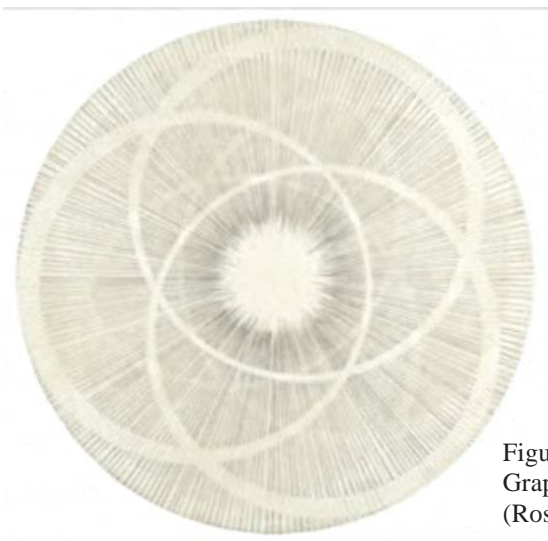


Figure 109. *Untitled (Oscillate)*, 2011, Palden Weinreb. Graphite and encaustic on board, diameter 61 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

Clare Harris observes that Weinreb's artworks often appear to play with the relationship between two and three dimensions, as he delineates form that appears to hover in an indeterminate space.⁴⁶⁵ In the work *Untitled (Oscillate)* (fig.109) Weinreb

⁴⁶⁴ H.G. Masters, "Catalogue Essay." *This World is Flat*.

⁴⁶⁵ Clare Harris. "Catalogue Essay." In *Generation Exile – Exploring New Tibetan Identities*, Palden Weinreb and Kesang Lamdark (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2011, 7–21), 14.

employs the geometric shapes more reminiscent of a *cakra* or *maṇḍala* combined with his distinctive *mantra*-like fluidity. The form appears like a globe, hovering in space. It is at once a hologram, a helix, a radiating sun, a plenum, space filled with matter. The eye is constantly lured to the centre back. It seems to oscillate, like breathing, like a meditation.

Weinreb's art recalls the virtual movement of the Kinetic art of Victor Vasarely, particularly his geometric abstractions of the 1960s. This 'virtual movement,' which imposes itself on the viewer is more than the mere suggestion of movement of traditional art. For Vasarely, who was preoccupied with wave vibrations, the notion of movement was inseparably linked with that of spatial illusion: "By virtue of the opposing perspective these positive and negative elements alternately arouse and dispel a 'sense of space', an illusion of movement and duration."⁴⁶⁶ In Weinreb's work it is the alternate line and non-line in intricate precision that provides the positive and negative elements that create the same illusion of movement and duration. His ellipses also recall the spiralling patterns of Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs* and interest in optical illusion.

The works contain a quality of harmony, symmetry, fluidity and ethereality. As deconstructed *maṇḍalas*, *cakras* and visual *mantras* it is easy to conceive of their ability to invoke peacefulness and tranquility in the viewer who meditates upon them. As we saw in Chapter Two, the diagrammatic elements of the *maṇḍala* are important in Tibetan Buddhist Tantric practices and visual culture. The Tantras also place great importance on the *mantra*, the recitation of special syllabic symbols to evoke the deity from the essential and infinite space within one's own consciousness. The meditator thus visualises the deity and concentrates on the deity's mystical syllable which gives rise to the image within him.⁴⁶⁷ Each deity has his own *mantras* and there are many different *mantras* for different

⁴⁶⁶ Frank Popper. *Origins and Development of Kinetic Art*. Translated by Stephen Bann (London: Studio Vista, 1968), 96, 101.

⁴⁶⁷ Tucci. *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, 30.

purposes and stages of ritual. Whilst many of the contemporary Tibetan artists have deconstructed and reconstructed the *maṇḍala* form and cosmology, Palden Weinreb is a contemporary Tibetan artist whose work could be said to embody the visual *mantra*.

Clare Harris likens Weinreb's precision to the strict lines necessary for producing the traditional *maṇḍala*: "Since the *maṇḍala* is essentially a reconstruction of the cosmos, there was no room for error when Tibetan monk-artists created such potent diagrams. Like Weinreb, they knew that each individual component of an image had to be perfect since they were ultimately replicating the sublime, transcendent form of the universe."⁴⁶⁸ As aniconic art for the twenty first century, Weinreb's forms act like visual *mantras* and seem to contain the universe within them or as Weinreb states "the path to nothingness."

Śūnyatā or 'emptiness' (or 'nothingness'), a concept concerning the reality of existence, is one of the most fundamental and esoteric concepts in Tibetan (Mahāyāna) Buddhist philosophy.⁴⁶⁹ In the work *This is Not a chair*, 2008 (fig. 110) Tenzing Rigdol delves into this esoteric principle in the language of contemporary art and invites the viewer to ponder the nature of existence and reality in the space of an art gallery.

The work consists of an ordinary freestanding, folding chair covered in Buddhist scriptures; an assisted 'ready-made' if you will. The title for his works echoes the witty intellectualism of René Magritte's famous graffito *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe). At the same time, with the object of a chair, Rigdol acknowledges Joseph Kosuth's conceptual artworks. But underlying both these gestures is the reference to Buddhist philosophy and the concept of *śūnyatā*.

⁴⁶⁸ Clare Harris. "Catalogue Essay." In *Generation Exile – Exploring New Tibetan Identities*, Palden Weinreb and Kesang Lamdark (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2011, 7–21), 15.

⁴⁶⁹ In Tibetan Buddhist terms, the reality of phenomena is created by our perceptions and consciousness, whereas all phenomena are empty of existing independently. "Inherent existence is not apprehended to exist by any valid perception or state of mind. It is from this point of view that we speak of the self of phenomena and the self of a person as not existing." (Tsultim Gyeltsen (Geshe). *Mirror of Wisdom - Teachings of Emptiness*. Translated by Lotsawa Tenzin Dorjee (Long Beach, California: Thubten Dgargye Ling Publications, 2000), 110.)

Figure 110. *This is Not a Chair*, 2008, Tenzing Rigdol, chair and scriptures (Rossi & Rossi, London)



Magritte's work *La Trahison des images* (1928–9) depicting a pipe and the inscription, "This is not a pipe," raises questions about the relationship of images to the things they represent. In particular, the question is raised about the way meaning is conveyed, or blocked, by symbols."⁴⁷⁰ Magritte's title, *The Treachery of Images*, suggests betrayal and deceit. Rigdol's work goes even further in its epistemological and ontological exploration, not just of our perception of the world - which as Magritte declared, is false - but into the very nature of being and existence.

Buddhism's very particular and radical stance on reality and perception takes Magritte's treatise a step further. For this work is not a picture of a chair but an actual chair; at least it is the thing that we perceive and label as a chair. So then how can it be said to not be (a chair)? As it is normally stated in Buddhist thought: nothing exists from its own side and everything is subject to dependant origination.⁴⁷¹ In other words the existence of phenomena is causal rather than springing spontaneously into existence. So when Rigdol says 'this is not a chair' he means that it is not a chair because, according to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, it is empty of inherent or objective existence. It is

⁴⁷⁰ Robert Hughes. *The Shock of the New, Art and the Century of Change* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 244.

⁴⁷¹ Jeffrey Hopkins. *Emptiness Yoga, The Tibetan Middle Way* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 78.

interconnected to and dependent upon other phenomena. In terms of Buddhist philosophy, the work can be read as a modern visual form of the traditional Buddhist parables which used similes to help to explain esoteric concepts such as the interconnectedness of things and emptiness of existence.⁴⁷²

The Buddhist *Lankavatara Sūtra*⁴⁷³ is a discourse on the false appearance of things, the nature of consciousness and how the mind creates a false dualistic experience of self and the world.⁴⁷⁴ According to the *sūtra*, objects in themselves are neither in existence nor in non-existence and are quite devoid of the alternatives of being and non-being (duality). Rather, there is but one common essence. Only by casting off notions of

⁴⁷² *The Questions of King Milinda* is a Buddhist text dating from before the early fifth century which consists of the discussion of Buddhist doctrine treated in the form of conversations between a certain King Milinda and Nāgasena, a Buddhist sage (Muller & Davids 1996). In one dialogue the Nāgasena explains the nature of existence and emptiness of phenomena to King Milinda using the simile of a chariot:

(King Milinda to Nāgasena): 'Then thus, ask as I may, I can discover no Nāgasena. Nāgasena is a mere empty sound. Who then is the Nāgasena that we see before us? ...

And the venerable Nāgasena said to Milinda the king: ... 'How then did you come, on foot, or in a chariot?'

'I did not come, Sir, on foot. I came in a carriage.'

'Then if you came, Sire, in a carriage, explain, to me what that is. Is it the pole that is the chariot?'

'I did not say that.'

'Is it the axle that is the chariot?'

'Certainly not.'

'Is it the wheels, or the framework, or the ropes, or the yoke, or the spokes of the wheels, or the goad, that are the chariot?'

And to all these he still answered no.

'Then is it all these parts of it that are the chariot?'

'No, Sir.'

'But is there anything outside them that is the chariot?'

And still he answered no.

'Then thus, ask as I may, I can discover no chariot. Chariot is a mere empty sound. What then is the chariot you say you came in? It is a falsehood that your Majesty has spoken, an untruth! There is no such thing as a chariot! ...

And Milinda the king replied to Nāgasena, and said: '... It is on account of its having all these things – the pole, and the axle, the wheels, and the framework, the ropes, the yoke, the spokes, and the goad – that it comes under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of "chariot."'

'... Your Majesty has rightly grasped the meaning of "chariot." And just even so it is on account of all those things you questions me about – the thirty-two kinds of organic matter in a human body, and the five constituent elements of being – that I come under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of "Nāgasena" ...

(Muller, F. Max, ed. *The Questions of King Milinda*. Sacred Books of the East. Translated by T.W. Rhys Davids (1890) (Delhi: D.K. Publishers, 1996), 43–45.

⁴⁷³ The *Lankavatara Sūtra* is one of the major texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism, written some time before the 5th century (D.T. Suzuki 2005, xv). It is referred to by the Tibetan monk Bu Ston in his *History of Buddhism in India and Tibet* in the 13th century (Bu-ston (1290-1364). *The History of Buddhism in India and Tibet*. Translated by E. Obermiller (Delhi: Winsome Books, 2005), 158, 162.

⁴⁷⁴ Mitchell, *Buddhism, Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 104.

oneness and otherness, being and non-being, can one realise wisdom and ultimate reality.⁴⁷⁵ In the chapter on “False-Imagination and Knowledge of Appearance” it is explained that the objective world rises from the mind itself and that, in fact, the whole mind-system arises from the mind itself.⁴⁷⁶ All things are like *māyā* (illusion).⁴⁷⁷

This notion is not exclusive to Buddhist thought; indeed Kant followed a similar train of thought. For example, in *The Critique of Pure Reason* he says “Still less must *phenomenon* and *appearance* be held to be identical. For truth or illusory appearance does not reside in the object, in so far as it is intuited, but in the judgement upon the object, in so far as it is thought.”⁴⁷⁸ According to Kant, the outer world causes only the matter of sensation, but the mental apparatus orders this matter in space and time, and supplies the concepts by means of which we understand experience. Perception is subjective, therefore things in themselves, which are the causes of our sensations, are unknowable.⁴⁷⁹ Thus our vision of the world does arise from the mind itself and therefore we cannot know what the world objectively looks like independently of the interpretive schemas we use to order our sensory experience.

Conceptual artist, Joseph Kosuth, echoes Kant’s view: “The accuracy in which we perceive the world directly corresponds to the perceptivity of our apparatus; thus, the entire base of our knowledge exists entirely on a projection, empirically based on a general idea we have acquired through experience of what seems to be and what seems not to be. All thought or knowledge or ‘truth’ is man-made.”⁴⁸⁰ In his work *One and Three Chairs*, Kosuth explores the nature of things and appearances, presenting a chair, a

⁴⁷⁵ D.T. Suzuki (trans.) *The Lankavatara Sūtra, An Epitomized Version* (Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishing, 2005), 8–13.

⁴⁷⁶ “The objective world, like a vision, is a manifestation of the mind itself.” Ibid., 10.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷⁸ Immanuel Kant. *The Critique of Pure Reason, The Critique of Practical Reason, and other ethical treatises* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1952), 108.

⁴⁷⁹ Bertrand Russell. *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Unwin University Books, 1980), 680.

⁴⁸⁰ Joseph Kosuth. *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991), 4.

photograph of a chair and a definition of a chair in words. Rigdol's work of a chair which declares that it is not a chair, provides the final element in Kosuth's equation. Rigdol sought to explore whether the perception of an object could be changed by an intervention. He says:

I wondered if I could change the functionality of a clearly defined object by adding other values to it. In this case, I covered the chair with Tibetan Buddhist scriptures and asked myself if this could still be a chair? Perhaps it is a chair which one cannot use to sit on, or maybe someone can sit on it while others cannot, depending on their own mental disposition.⁴⁸¹

The object chosen by Rigdol for his work, a chair, is an apposite ready-made; it is neutral, it has no special significance in Tibetan or Buddhist iconography, it is an everyday object like thousands of others. In this analysis it could be substituted for any other everyday neutral object without having the slightest effect on the implication of the work. It is merely an exemplar for all things, all phenomena.

Through the medium of the neutral object of the 'ready-made' and the idea behind the 'treason' or illusion of images, Rigdol's work becomes the contemporary vehicle for the contemplation of 'emptiness' and highest reality according to Buddhist thought. While the Buddhist scriptures tell us that the higher reality of 'emptiness' cannot be expressed in words, Rigdol attempts to express the concept through art. The true essence of the object is depicted by the scriptures with which it is covered. The scriptures become a metaphor for 'emptiness' like aniconic Buddhist symbols.

Lhasa - Allegory

A number of contemporary artists in Lhasa also explore the possibilities of conceptual art and allegory. They too produce art works with underlying Tibetan Buddhist concepts without resort to depictions of deities to communicate these themes. However,

⁴⁸¹ *Art Tattler*. "The Experiments, Philosophies, and Politics of Tenzing Rigdol." 2009. <http://arttattler.com/archivetenzingrigdol.html>.

while the Tibetan contemporary artists in the diaspora are reflecting on the contemporary relevance of Buddhist concepts in a Western context, the focus of the artists in Lhasa is, instead, on the erosion of culture in their society and homeland.

Harnessing the Buddhist concept of impermanence as an allegory of the erosion of Tibetan culture, the Lhasan artist, Benchung, explored these themes in a video installation work entitled *Floating River Ice*, 2003, (fig. 111). The work, employing multiple monitors playing unsynchronised copies of the fifteen-minute long video, was exhibited at the *Scorching Sun of Tibet* exhibition in Beijing in 2010. Benchung, who was once a student of Gonkar Gyatso, attained his Masters degree in fine art at Oslo University, Norway, where he met international artists and travelled to the art centres of Europe. Consequently, he has been able to embrace the new mediums of Western contemporary art in the pursuit of his own creative ideas.



Figure 111. *Floating River Ice*, 2003, Benchung, video installation, 15 mins. Looped (Songzhuang Art Museum, Beijing)

In the work, Benchung is seen drawing patterns in chalk on the road of a Lhasa intersection in the early morning. The patterns are based on a traditional ritual performed at important moments or places such as on the ground before monastery gates for a high

Lama's visit, or on the door of a house where a marriage takes place, to bestow luck and good fortune.⁴⁸² Traditionally, the eight auspicious symbols of Tibetan Buddhism,⁴⁸³ which, as mentioned above, have been used in aniconic Buddhist art, are painted in white clay or limestone powder on the doors of gates, walls and on the road in ritually important places. (fig. 112) Similarly, when a person dies symbols are drawn on the ground to take the body from the home to the burial site while two lines of chalk are drawn along the road from the door to the intersection to prevent evil spirits from crossing the path.⁴⁸⁴

Figure 112. Auspicious symbols on pavement, Sherabling (Tibetan) monastery, Baijnath, Himachal Pradesh, India, 2010)



Benchung chose the urban street location in Lhasa for the work because an intersection represents danger, activity and change.⁴⁸⁵ At an intersection there is the danger that your path will be intercepted from a number of other directions, which could cause harm or otherwise affect your life. An intersection is also a place where one changes direction. Benchung also chose this location because of its modernity and universality. It is recognisable as a city intersection in any urban landscape. It is not the old Lhasa of Western imagination or Tibetan memory, with mud or cobble streets and dung daubed houses, but the new Lhasa with traffic lights, taxis and neon lit shops and

⁴⁸² Benchung conversation with author, Lhasa, October 2010.

⁴⁸³ *Cakra* (wheel), parasol or umbrella, lotus flower, conch shell, treasure vase, endless knot, pair of gold fishes, banner of victory.

⁴⁸⁴ Heinrich Harrer. *Lost Lhasa, Heinrich Harrer's Tibet* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1992), 200.

⁴⁸⁵ Benchung conversation with author, Lhasa, October 2010.

restaurants. It is what Lhasa has become.⁴⁸⁶ The contemporary urban setting throws into higher relief the tradition and technique of the painting of the auspicious symbols: the old and new meeting at the crossroads. It is the fusion or hybridisation of traditional and contemporary art techniques and concepts across boundaries of culture, time and space.

Benchung went to the intersection with a friend who helped film the process while it was still dark, apart from the street-lights that can be seen reflected in the road surface wet from rain. The film first captures Benchung drawing different patterns on the road, both figurative and abstract. Over the course of the film the sun rises and the sky lightens as vehicles cross the intersection and the patterns slowly disappear, eroded by the tyres of the cars, by people crossing the road and by the rain. Eventually, it is not possible to perceive what patterns were there.

Benchung was inspired by the traditional sand *maṇḍala* practice which is undertaken slowly and carefully but destroyed in a ritual ceremony upon completion. He says that although the sand *maṇḍala* technique and tradition is not the same as the ground painting of auspicious symbols, the process is similar, its ceremonial destruction emphasising the impermanent and ever-changing nature of things.⁴⁸⁷

The medium of video is not used in this work as a narrative tool but to express the concept of time. The first phase of the film has an element of performance art with Benchung drawing patterns in the half-light. There is something reminiscent of Hans Namuth's 1950 film of Jackson Pollock at work in Benchung's gesture, as he bends his body to apply his chalk to the road surface.

The film then transitions from performance into a work about time. Erosion, change and decay normally happen so slowly that they are not perceivable to the eye and therefore often go unnoticed or ignored. Benchung captures the process of change in this

⁴⁸⁶ Benchung, conversation with author, Lhasa, October 2010.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

work and it is projected back as art. The sense of change in the exposure of the erosion of the patterns on the road is heightened by the transition of darkness to light, and the endless looping of work reinforces this ongoing cycle of night and day. There is also the sense of surveillance as Benchung goes about his work, surveillance of the city at night, surveillance of a Chinese occupied Tibetan city, surveillance of time. Benchung utilises multiple mediums of the road as a canvas, the chalk, himself in performance, as well as the video camera. As a new artistic medium, video is said to be the 'art of time'.⁴⁸⁸ It is thus a medium which successfully delivers Benchung's expression of the Buddhist concept of impermanence and erosion of tradition. Moreover, like Gade's *Ice Buddha Sculpture – Lhasa River* (fig. 19), Benchung's installation carries an undercurrent of protest at the destruction of Tibetan society.

Benchung continued his exploration of impermanence in another video installation work, *Untitled 1*, 2006 (fig. 113). In this work he explores this Buddhist concept by recording the slow melting of butter on the window of a suburban train in Norway. The butter is a staple of the traditional Tibetan diet so is used to represent Tibetan culture, while the train represents time and movement. The butter is smeared on paper and hung on the window of the train. The focus on the window is constant but the backdrop is continually changing as the train moves. The backlit image first reveals the hills outside Oslo, proceeds through the suburbs and under the city to the suburbs on the other side. It is winter and behind the butter smeared paper the landscape rushes by, voices are heard, stops are called and people board and alight the train. Benchung uses the melting butter to demonstrate the process of change; the butter melts slowly, but outside the speed of the train causes the landscape to change rapidly. As the butter melts the paper starts to change and become translucent as it absorbs the butter and as the light

⁴⁸⁸ Michael Rush. *Video Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 8.

changes. Benchung wanted to show the counterparts of control and lack of control in his work, which he considers applies to life in general; either way change is a constant:

I use this because you know the butter melting, the process of changing and the city on the subway the way of mindscape also changing – so this is the process of changing very slowly. Because in the subway the heat is not very strong, warmer, so slowly, but outside the speed of the subway the landscape changes quickly, so I want to show control or uncontrol in my works. Like life, sometimes can control and sometimes really cannot control. And also those works I got the idea from Tibet and Buddhist philosophies, impermanence, changing.⁴⁸⁹

Figure 113. *Untitled 1*, 2006, Benchung, video installation (courtesy of the artist)



In Tibetan religious culture butter is used in monasteries to make sculptures, so this material has a long-standing tradition in the Tibetan arts. However, the butter sculptures of the monasteries are made with coloured butter and are designed to retain their shape for an extended period of time. Benchung wanted to use the material in the opposite way showing its perishable nature, as well as creating an abstract image rather than a figurative work. In Benchung's view, the mixing of colour with the butter changes the butter into something else, whereas he wanted to focus on the butter itself and use it as a metaphor.⁴⁹⁰ He wanted to use traditional materials to connect with his work but not in a traditional way, in order to demonstrate the ephemeral nature of things. Again, any

⁴⁸⁹ Benchung. Conversation with author, Lhasa, October 2010.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

narrative in the work is subordinated to the conceptual aspect of time and change. Viewed in this way the work is a cross-cultural synthesis of mediums and ideas expressing an abstract concept of Buddhist philosophy drawn from the artist's native culture to substantiate its truth and relevance in a world that is changing at an ever more rapid pace.

Penpa is another artist from Lhasa who explores the Tibetan Buddhist view of the human condition. For a number of years now, Penpa has been paring back his work in an attempt to arrive at his essential core as an artist. While he used to work with a full colour palette, he started to strip away layers by experimenting with black, white and primary colours. Then, in his later work he went a step further by using the more reductive media of pencil, ink and paper, and natural drawing techniques.⁴⁹¹ Penpa has also returned to art school a number of times in his artistic journey. Born in a village just outside Lhasa in 1974, he graduated from Hefei Normal University, Anhui, in 1995. Later, he attended Tibet University art school in Lhasa from 1999 to 2003. When I met him in 2011, Penpa had returned to Tibet University to compete a Masters degree. He is a member of the progressive Gedun Choephel Artists Guild in Lhasa.

In a series of allegorical works entitled *Five Subtle Desires* (2010), which were shown at the big *Scorching Sun of Tibet* exhibition in Beijing, Penpa uses the body to portray abstract ideas. While Buddhist art, like Christian art, has a long tradition of using allegory to express religious and philosophical concepts, Penpa's works are unadorned and do not rely on complex iconography. Instead, they are raw and undisguised in their attempt to penetrate the heart of the matter. Penpa explores the causes of suffering according to Buddhist philosophy and the constituents of body and mind known as the five aggregates (*skandha*).⁴⁹² In Buddhist thought the senses are the source of attachment or desire, and as such contribute to the causal origination of suffering. The senses can be

⁴⁹¹ Penpa. Conversation with author, Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, Lhasa. 2011.

⁴⁹² Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 220.

attracted or repelled by worldly phenomena giving rise to positive or negative feelings. Positive sensations lead to desire and attachment while negative ones intensify feelings of desire in the opposite direction – the impulse to escape from negative feelings. This produces an endless process of attraction and aversion, attachment, desire and craving without satisfaction or peace. The kind of wisdom needed to remove the desires associated with the five aggregates is clear insight into the true nature of things.⁴⁹³ In Penpa's *Five Subtle Desires*, he expresses his own version of the sense faculties by depicting taste (flavour), body, sound, touch and smell, as a series of self-portraits.

Figure 114. *Five Subtle Desires 1, Flavor*, 2010, Penpa
mixed media, 140 x 140 cm
(Songzhuang Art Museum, Beijing)



In *Five Subtle Desires 1, Flavor* (fig. 114) Penpa portrays himself and his double seated at a table one would find in a bar or restaurant, although in this instance the scene appears more like a set of a theatre production with a backdrop depicting an abstract version of snow mountains covered in Tibetan calligraphic script or scripture. We find Penpa and his double at this table, dressed in jeans and boots and jackets, in the course of a drinking spree. There are bottles of beer on the table and one of his selves is drinking

⁴⁹³ Mitchell, *Buddhism, Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 41.

from a glass. The other self has passed out on the table, his bottle of beer a fallen soldier like himself. The work depicts the sense desire of taste, the addictive nature of the senses and the attachment to something imbibed. The substance of alcohol has the obvious properties of intoxication and addiction, so the consequences of desire and attachment are immediate to the viewer. Penpa says that the work is also about the social problems of drinking.⁴⁹⁴ He believes that a person may have great potential, but in society the pressure to conform or perform can result in the addiction to the gratification of the sense desires.⁴⁹⁵ While the Buddhist view of the senses is part of the Tibetan culture, the work makes obvious the universality of desire which applies to all things perceived through the sense faculties.

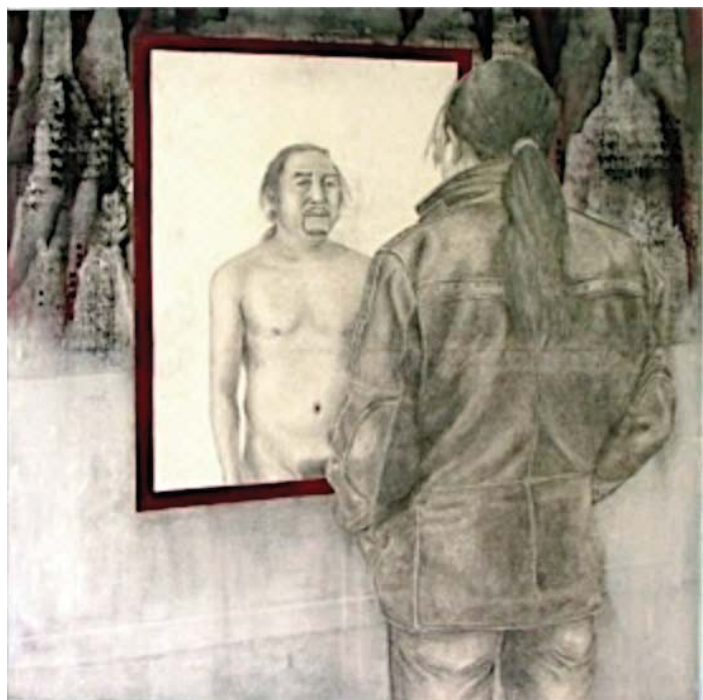


Figure 115. *Five Subtle Desires 2, Body*
2010, Penpa, mixed media,
140 x 140 cm
(Songzhuang Art Museum, Beijing)

Speaking about the second work of the series, *Body* (fig. 115), Penpa explained that after looking at himself in the mirror he was reminded of a traditional Tibetan proverb that says you need to have a good eye to look at other people, but to look at

⁴⁹⁴ Drinking and alcoholism are increasing problems in Tibet. Indeed, Nortse, has experienced an ongoing battle with alcohol. The artists Yak Tseton and his brother Tsekal created an installation work out of beer bottles, entitled *Arak Stupa* (2010), to highlight the problem. (Conversations with artists, Nyandak and Nortse, Lhasa, 2010, 2011.)

⁴⁹⁵ Penpa, conversation with author, Lhasa, 2011.

yourself you need a celestial mirror. In other words, you need to see yourself through others.⁴⁹⁶ In this work the artist is standing before a wall-mounted mirror wearing street clothes of jeans and jacket, his long hair tied back in a pony-tail. His back is to the viewer while his reflection in the mirror shows his face and front. However, his reflection in the mirror is naked, lending a surreal aspect to the work, not unlike Magritte's unexpected twists and surprising disconnects.

In Penpa's work the man standing before the mirror wears clothes to cover up his real self. Penpa believes that you don't show your real or true self when with other people, the true self is masked while out in society. But underneath the outward show lies the true self, the real person. It is the celestial mirror that reveals this clearly; the naked person is a metaphor for the true self.⁴⁹⁷ With regard to the Buddhist concept of the 'no-self', the work shows the person standing before the mirror as existing in the mundane reality rather than the higher reality, while the self in the mirror, is naked, stripped down to its essential higher reality essence. The Magrittism here is that we normally associate the mirror with illusion, but in this case it is the mirror that contains the true self. The celestial mirror reflects the state of 'emptiness'.

In *Five Subtle Desires 3, Sound* (fig. 116) Penpa portrays himself on his knees against an abstract backdrop of Tibetan calligraphy. His hair is loose and his mouth is wide open as if emitting a *cri de coeur*, while he wrenches at his clothes. Penpa completed this work at the time of the death of the musician Michael Jackson.⁴⁹⁸ The portrayal of sound emanating from the artist's mouth is that of grief and loss. Thus Penpa portrays both aspects of attraction and aversion of sound; the pleasure of the sounds created by Jackson and the loss of the same by his death. The futility of his scream for the loss of his country echoes around the snow mountains formed by the Tibetan calligraphy.

⁴⁹⁶ Penpa, conversation with author, Lhasa 2011.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

Figure 116. *Five Subtle Desires 3, Sound* 2010, Penpa, mixed media, 140 x 140 cm (Songzhuang Art Museum, Beijing)



Figure 117. *Five Subtle Desires 4, Touch* 2010, Penpa, mixed media, 140 x 140 cm (Songzhuang Art Museum, Beijing)

For the depiction of the sense desire of *Touch* (fig. 117) Penpa portrays himself seated on a stool with a globe of the earth clutched to his lap. His hair is tied back, he is naked from the waist up and his jeans are undone. Before deciding how to accomplish the work Penpa researched the word ‘touch’, as in the ‘sense of touch’, in the Tibetan dictionary and noted a sexual element involved in the definition of the word. Following

this aspect of the sense of touch Penpa portrays himself as in the act of coitus with the world, or even raping the earth.⁴⁹⁹ It symbolises the taking of the power of the world or leaving an imprint by insemination on the earth, making a future mark on the planet. On a political level Penpa suggests the work is an allegory for the possible situation of the extinction of Tibetans as a race in greater China. In that eventuality there is also the fact of an indelible impression left on the planet by them which will endure.⁵⁰⁰

Penpa feels that this is the most successful of the series in portraying the particular sense desire. Of all the works in the series this one seems to function on the most levels. It emphasises the importance of the sense of touch in the sex act and equates it to the touching of the earth – something primordial. The work also equates the desire for sex with the desire for power, for in both these instances the desire can be overpowering. As much as they can lead to pleasure and accomplishment, they can also lead to destruction.

For the sense of *Smell* (fig. 118) Penpa portrays himself seated on a chair wearing a gas-mask against a backdrop of the stylised snow mountains of Tibet. While Tibet has been renowned for its pristine atmosphere, there is increasing pollution from industry and urbanisation brought by Chinese occupiers and foreign investment. Although Penpa does not consider himself a strict Buddhist, the Buddhist ideas permeate his work.⁵⁰¹ The work asks how much of Tibet will survive for the next generation.



Figure 118. *Five Subtle Desires 5, Smell*,
2010 Penpa, mixed media
(Songzhuang Art Museum, Beijing)

⁴⁹⁹ Penpa, conversation with author, Lhasa 2011.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

The works are crafted in pencil and ball point on canvas. They are monochromatic with sketchy abstractions of Tibetan scriptures or calligraphy in each background. This type of portraiture is not known in traditional Tibetan art.⁵⁰² Depictions of deities and important religious persons abound, but they generally repeat standard characteristics as identifiers, although there are many examples of the likeness of patrons being painted into religious works.⁵⁰³ In his art practice Penpa wants to pursue a form of contemporary art through personal narrative as a means to express himself and the broader ideas. The medium of pencil gives the works a feeling of intimacy and rawness that enhances the personal narrative as well as the allegorical portrayal of Buddhist and abstract concepts.



Figure 119. *Letters*, 2010, Nortse, installation, welded metal, earth, butter lamps, 180 x 85 cm, x 30 (Songzhuang Art Museum, Beijing)

Like Benchung and Penpa, Nortse has also explored the Buddhist concept of impermanence and the erosion of Tibetan culture. Nortse's 2010 installation work *Letters* (fig. 119), first shown at the *Scorching Sun of Tibet* exhibition in Beijing, combines a

⁵⁰² Although Leigh Miller states that self-portraiture is a rarity in Tibetan contemporary art, citing only one or two other examples, we note that the artist Nortse has created a number of series of self-portraits. (Leigh Miller, doctoral thesis, 473–474).

⁵⁰³ See for example, *Maitreya Buddha thangka*. Rhie and Thurman. *Wisdom and Compassion, The Sacred Art of Tibet*, catalogue, 101.

number of techniques and mediums. Monumental calligraphic sculptures made from welded iron plates represent the thirty letters of the Tibetan alphabet. They are each implanted on an individual bed of earth, and each letter is surrounded by a metal truss bearing marks of rust and tarnish. The metal is untreated and as the pieces are exposed to the elements they will continue to rust and erode.

While the work points to the Buddhist concept of the impermanent nature of all things, it is also a metaphor for the state of Tibetan culture - language being an important group identifier - which is being eroded by the presence of a dominant Chinese culture as well as influences from the West. According to Nortse, the dilution of the Tibetan language has become obvious. Amongst his own generation, Chinese words commonly enter the conversation, and many of the younger generation of Tibetans now speak Chinese much of the time. In some parts of ethnic Tibet the loss of the Tibetan language has reached crisis point with 'mother tongue' policies not being enforced and children being taught only in Chinese.⁵⁰⁴ Nortse sees language as culture and a necessary part of our world. So, in his view, the work is not nationalistic but rather international and humanitarian.⁵⁰⁵ It is a metaphor for impermanence and loss of cultural identity.

In as much as the work is in a constant state of change and decay, it is forever unfinished, or ongoing. Nortse thus makes the constant state of change of all phenomena a part of his work. His intention is to make the work stable by treating or coating it if ever serious attention is paid to the Tibetan language and literature in China or elsewhere, in order to redress the loss. Otherwise he wants to leave the work to the elements so that the disappearance of his work will symbolise the assimilation of Tibetan culture.⁵⁰⁶

The letter sculptures of the installation are arranged in rows and fill a vast space in which the viewer can physically experience the Tibetan language and calligraphy.

⁵⁰⁴ *The Valley of the Heroes*. A Film by Khashem Gyal, 53 min. 2013.

⁵⁰⁵ Nortse, conversation with author, Lhasa, October 2010.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

Traditional Tibetan butter lamps are lit between the rows, as if in prayer or hope. The butter lamps connect the letters to the past and the small flames light the path to the future in which the status of the language is becoming increasingly more precarious. Language is the essence of group identity, but the beauty of Nortse's calligraphy does not escape the viewer. Tibetans may enjoy seeing their alphabet displayed in such a monumental way. Non-Tibetans may simply admire the calligraphy and tranquility induced by the butter lamps. The monumentality of the work seems to insist on the permanence of the language and calligraphy, against the odds. It is a metaphor not just for the erosion of all culture, but also extinction and loss of things from this earth.



Figure 120. *Zen Meditation*, 2012, Nortse, installation, monk's robes, metal frames, butter lamps, Chinese money, scriptures, sand, 100 x 100 x 80 cm, x 6 (Art Gallery of NSW)

Nortse has made further explorations into similar themes using the same concept of materials in another installation work called *Zen Meditation*, 2012 (fig. 120) which formed part of the *Go East* exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2015. In this work Nortse has used the same type of iron framework as in his *Letters* work. There

are six individual frames containing sand and butter lamps. Instead of monumental letters he has placed inside each frame bundles of robes of maroon cloth like those traditionally worn by Tibetan monks. In each sculpture the robes are arranged as if they are inhabited by an invisible person seated in a position of meditation. In Tibetan monasteries, row upon row of maroon clad monks sit for many hours chanting scriptures and meditating in the gloomy sanctum, lit only by butter lamps and clouded by wafts of incense. It is the effect of this familiar yet ancient scene that Nortse intends to portray with this installation, transplanted to the art gallery. In effect, the art gallery becomes the sanctum for meditation and contemplation.

For the viewer standing before this work it would be easy to imagine the sound of *mantras* being chanted and the aroma of incense and to feel a sense of calm descend. However, in Nortse's portrayal, the robes are empty and the butter lamps placed before each bundle are knocked over or upside down.

On the one hand this work recalls the aniconic era of Buddhist art where the empty space, in this instance inside the robes, symbolised the true essence of existence as 'emptiness'. While on the other, it contains the sense that the essence of something, the Tibetan culture or religion, has disappeared or diminished under the weight of external forces. These two levels of meaning appear to be equally represented in this compelling work by Nortse. As Tenzing Rigdol comments, this work recalls the *thangka* paintings used by Tantric practitioners for deity meditation "in which everything is intact except the body of the deity."⁵⁰⁷ Rigdol suggests that Nortse is perhaps "speaking about the negation of the self, or the disappearance of one's cultural identity, or ... simply inviting the viewer to assume or feel the volcanic, pure energies of those Buddhist monks and

⁵⁰⁷ Tenzing Rigdol. "Tenzing Rigdol on Nortse," *Art Asia Pacific* (Issue 80, Sep/Oct 2012), 23.

nuns to whom the world has turned their deaf ears.”⁵⁰⁸ In this work, Nortse has relocated the aniconic meditational painting in installation form to express his concerns at the erosion and dilution of Tibetan culture.

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate how the contemporary Tibetan artists have used the abstract concepts of Buddhist philosophy in their art practice, which, in effect, marks a development from aniconic Buddhist art to contemporary conceptual art. In the hands of the Tibetan contemporary artists, aniconic art is no longer only about the philosophical aspects of Buddhism, but also the ethical and philosophical questions of twenty-first century society.

In expressing philosophical concepts, the work of the contemporary Tibetan artists tends away from the narrative towards the abstract and the conceptual, but also uses figurative representations in new ways unknown in traditional Tibetan art. The artists incorporate new mediums which have no tradition in Tibetan visual culture, in some cases combining them with traditional or conventional techniques and materials with new materials. Thus we see work assisted by computer or digitally enhanced such as that of Palden Weinreb which transmits to the viewer a meditation and visual mantra, or invokes the sublime by use of artificial light sources. In the plastic and found objects or ready-made objects of modern mass manufacture in the works by Kesang Lamdark and Tenzing Rigdol, who incorporates scriptures in his work, the viewer is confronted with incongruous synthesis of East and West. Through Nortse's mixed-media installation constructions and Benchung's video installations we are compelled to contemplate impermanence on a spiritual level as well as the socio-political implications of change.

⁵⁰⁸ Tenzing Rigdol. "Tenzing Rigdol on Nortse," *Art Asia Pacific* (Issue 80, Sep/Oct 2012), 23.

Penpa's series of works, which explore the Buddhist view of the human condition, depart from tradition in the treatment of portraiture combined with abstraction.

In advancing into conceptual art, the artists come full circle in their deconstruction and reconstructions of their artistic and cultural heritage, yet their commitment to their cultural concepts remains undiminished. They explore philosophical concepts, such as identity and cultural change, in a way not seen since the aniconic era of Buddhist art before the second century, in which complex concepts were expressed by abstract symbols.

Chapter 6. Lhasa and Exile - A Disparate Cohesion

The contemporary art of the artists working in Lhasa and the Tibetan artists of the diaspora form a cohesive movement in many ways. Both sets of artists work with Buddhist and Tibetan symbolism and motifs and use or reference Tibetan materials. While drawing on their Tibetan artistic heritage, they are innovative in the use of these elements. They know each other (indeed some of the older artists have been teachers of the younger generation) and exhibit together in group exhibitions, exploring issues of Tibetan identity as well as universal themes such as globalization and climate change. Nevertheless, there are some differences in approach that can be discerned between the two sets of artists, particularly in relation to questions of identity.

On the one hand, the diaspora artists often focus on how they fit into a non-Tibetan environment. Their work often suggests a continual re-negotiation of self-identity with displacement and unfamiliar cultural situations. Even the second generation artists, who were born outside Tibet, explore the dichotomy of their Tibetan heritage and Western upbringing. In Lhasa, by contrast, the focus is more upon modern Tibetan society in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, the perceived stereotypes, and the effects of globalization and foreign influences (both Chinese and Western) on their culture and physical environment. In the first instance the concern is with the experience of geographical displacement from one's original homeland whereas in the latter case it is with encroachment of foreign influences from outside.

The Diasporic Experience

In his essay on exiled Tibetans in the West, Tibetan scholar Gyaltsen Gyaltag identified the issues experienced by the artists in the diaspora as common to Tibetan

refugees. He noticed that it is difficult for a Tibetan youth growing up in the West to find his or her identity. Young Tibetans commonly lose their original identity as a result of the necessary adaptation to local conditions. At the same time, they cannot simply adopt the identity of the host nation, and this creates a vacuum that they attempt to fill in an often painful and conflict-laden process of finding oneself within the framework of two different cultures.⁵⁰⁹

Gyaltsen says that Tibetans in exile bear the responsibility of preserving Tibetan culture against the threat of extinction. However, he emphasizes that rigid conservation “in the way a museum preserves a specimen” is not enough. Tibetans in exile must be open to development and renewal.⁵¹⁰ As he writes:

Such an understanding of culture is very important because in today’s world a social-cultural existence without influences from outside, such as the Tibetan experienced before 1959 in their self-imposed isolation, is no longer possible.⁵¹¹

Gonkar Gyatso’s work, *My Identity* (fig. 121), epitomizes the struggle with identity experienced by many of the Tibetan artists in exile. Although each of these artists has their own personal journey, as I have demonstrated in the course of my thesis, they share the same sense of displacement and the necessity of negotiation with their new environments. As Diana Baldon notes, Gyatso’s work, *My Identity*, reaches beyond the artist’s “own experience to engage the modernist dilemma facing contemporary Tibetans.”⁵¹² The dilemma is, as discussed in Chapter One, the question of what is ‘Tibetan’ today.

⁵⁰⁹ Gyaltsen Gyaltag. ‘Exiled Tibetans in Europe and North America’. In *Exile as Challenge, The Tibetan Diaspora*, Dagmar Bernstorff, Hubertus Von Welck (eds.), Orient Longman (New Delhi: 2004, 244–265), 252–253.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid. 263–264.

⁵¹¹ Ibid. 264.

⁵¹² Diana Baldon. “Gonkar Gyatso – My Identity: Style exercises in self-identification.” In *A Question of Evidence* (exhibition) Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (Vienna, 2008, 140–141), 140.



Figure 121. *My Identity 1 – 4*, 2003, Gonkar Gyatso, digital photographs, 56.6 x 70.6 cm each (Rubin Museum of Art, New York)

In the photographic self-portrait series *My Identity 1–4*, Gonkar Gyatso portrays four versions of himself as an artist in different circumstances, articulating his temporal, spatial and metaphysical journey as a contemporary Tibetan artist. The work is both autobiographical as well as a projection of personal and Tibetan identity backwards and forwards in time, across continents and cultures, capturing the shifts in ideology which accompany this journey.

Gyatso's work references a photograph of Tsering Dondrup, taken in Lhasa by the American traveller, Charles Suydam Cutting in 1937.⁵¹³ (fig. 122) In that photograph, the senior *thangka* painter of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, is seated before a traditional wooden stretcher frame (*kyang shing*) bearing an unfinished deity *thangka*. He holds his brush in

⁵¹³ It appears that an error is being perpetuated, that Cutting was the first American and Westerner to enter Lhasa (see Smithsonian Institution Archives http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_296615; and Diana Baldon, *Op. Cit.*). The Italian Jesuit, Ippolito Desideri, was in Lhasa as early as 1716 (Filippo De Filippi, *An Account of Tibet, the travels of Ippolito Desideri, 1712–1727* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2005), the British army entered the city in 1904 (Peter Fleming, *Bayonets to Lhasa* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962)), and the American, Prof. William Montgomery McGovern, claimed to have entered Lhasa in the 1920s (*To Lhasa in Disguise* (New York: The Century Co., 1934)). The Newark Museum states correctly that Cutting was the first American to officially enter Lhasa. He was one of the few Westerners to be granted a Tibetan visa (Tucci was another) during a period when the country was largely closed to outsiders.

his right hand and looks toward the camera. He is in a room or studio, surrounded by his painter's box and table holding the accoutrements of his trade. Gyatso replicates this composition in each of his four images.



Figure 122. Tsering Dondrup, *thangka* painter. Lhasa, 1937, Charles Suydam Cutting (The Newark Museum Archives)

In the first image of Gyatso's work, the artist portrays himself as the traditional court painter from a bygone era. All the major elements of Cutting's photograph are repeated. He is seated before a canvas painting a Buddha *thangka*. Next to him, are his painter's box, paints and brushes. The costume marks his status in society; the long turquoise earring (*so-byis*) for example, is worn in the left ear only by lay officials.⁵¹⁴ The image portrays the same era as the Cutting photograph (1930s), and, in the series of images, represents a pre-1959 Tibet. Thus, Gyatso imagines himself as an artist in a time when virtually all art when was religious art, and conduct and dress were closely prescribed and regulated in a rigidly stratified society.⁵¹⁵ Although Gyatso did not experience this Tibet personally, it is his patrimony as an artist. Growing up in Lhasa during the Cultural Revolution, Gyatso had no knowledge of traditional Tibetan art. It

⁵¹⁴ Tucci, *Tibet, Land of Snows*, 51; Valrae Reynolds. *Treasures of Tibetan Art from the Newark Museum* (Munich: Prestel, 1999), 99.

⁵¹⁵ Tsering Yangdzom. *The Aristocratic Families in Tibetan History, 1900–1951* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2006), 241.

was only after he left Tibet that he learned about traditional Tibetan visual culture, firstly in India amongst the Tibetan exiles, and then in West where Western Tibetologists published their Tibetan researches and museums amassed collections of Tibetan art.⁵¹⁶

During his artist residency at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford in 2003, Gyatso viewed hundreds of images of Tibet from the museum archive collections.⁵¹⁷ For all the ‘museumizing’ perpetrated by the West upon ‘exotic’ cultures, these collections can form a bridge for someone like Gyatso whose link with his own history has been severed. He wrote: “I grew up in Chinese-occupied Tibet, a land where history had been almost erased.”⁵¹⁸ In viewing historical images Gyatso is, of course, at the mercy of the collectors and the curators and their selection and interpretative processes. In this respect, he is like any other visitor to the museum. However, while a non-Tibetan may view the images as an interested outsider or scholar, a Tibetan may scour the images for points of reference, recognition and familiarity. Thus, in the first image of Gyatso’s photographic series, he is exploring the past, his Tibetan heritage, to find a link with his modern self.

As this is the only image in the series depicting a Tibet before the Chinese occupation, it carries the burden of representing Tibet up to that point. Yet in reality, the era depicted, as it is modelled on the Cutting photograph of 1937, was a time in which significant changes were occurring in Tibet and a modernization process had already been set in motion.⁵¹⁹ This fact is born out by the Cutting photograph itself, which serves as an

⁵¹⁶ Conversation with Gonkar Gyatso, Brisbane, 21 August 2011.

⁵¹⁷ Clare Harris. “The Buddha goes global: some thoughts towards a transnational art history.” *Art History* (September 2006: 698–720), 711.

⁵¹⁸ Gonkar Gyatso. “No Man’s Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet, The Experience of an Exiled Tibetan Artist.” *Tibet Journal* (Vol. XXVIII, nos. 1 & 2, 2003. 147–160), 149–150.

⁵¹⁹ In the few decades since the Younghusband military expedition in 1904, a British Trade Agency had been established and there was a permanent British plenipotentiary presence in Lhasa. An English school was set up in the 1920s, and other students were being sent abroad for education. Electricity was introduced, vehicular roads were constructed, and the Dalai Lama imported some cars to Lhasa (these cars are the subject of a 2004 painting by Karma Phuntsok, *Vehicles*). There was a strong faction, including some military commanders, that was committed to modernization. Amongst this faction there was an ostentatious adoption of Western uniforms, dress, customs such as drinking sweet tea (rather than Tibetan butter tea), shaking hands, playing tennis and polo. This faction was considered by others to be a threat to the

illustration of the observer effect. Although Cutting (who had presented an autographed photograph of the American President Hoover to the 13th Dalai Lama⁵²⁰) may have intended in an Orientalist manner to capture a quintessential Tibetan painter he has contributed to the changes in Tibetan society by being there, with his Western manners, dress and technology. The Tibetan painter is changed by the technology used to capture his action, but Cutting obtained an image for posterity that fixed the quintessential Tibetan painter in time. The subject of the photograph will grow old and see the changes in his country; the viewer of the photograph sees only one static image of Tibet.

In the second image, Gyatso portrays himself during the period of the Cultural Revolution, a time which Gyatso personally experienced. As he has said of this time:

My family was a model of Communism, with my father serving as an officer in the Chinese army and my mother working as a clerk for the government. Everything in our home was Chinese, and the entire family strictly adhered to party guidelines.⁵²¹

Gyatso's artistic talents were revealed when he was a schoolboy in Lhasa, and he was singled out to draw images on the black board in the prescribed manner.⁵²² He thus found himself making drawings of Chairman Mao at an early age. In this image Gyatso is painting a portrait of Mao Tse-tung in accordance with the social realist propaganda aesthetic and ideology of the time. The rich wall decoration and elaborate brocade covered *thangkas* are gone, and instead the walls are covered in newsprint and the floor is bare concrete. The hierarchical society and religious ideology has been replaced by Communist ideology that eschews bourgeois trappings. The Red Guard uniform that Gyatso wears is symbolic of the ideology under which he operated as a young artist. Even

established order. (Tsepon W.D. Shakabpa. *Tibet: A Political History* (New Delhi: Paljor Publications, 2010), 11-12, 342, 397; Melvyn C. Goldstein. *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 89).

⁵²⁰ Tsepon W.D. Shakabpa. *Tibet: A Political History* (New Delhi: Paljor Publications, 2010), 367.

⁵²¹ G. Gyatso. "No Man's Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet," 147.

⁵²² Conversation with Gonkar Gyatso, Sydney, 2010.

during the later ‘Open Door’ period when Gyatso was at university in Beijing, there was still an amount of control over the activity of the student artists. He says:

... the program is conservative, there was no emphasis on creativity ... Also they restrict you to do something, the whole subject matter is very strict ... they are interested in subject more to positive view about the social or daily life, rather than more personal or religious. I remember, I prepared a piece which ... for them maybe its religious, but for me its more [a] spiritual piece and I wasn’t allowed to continue with that subject so I have to start something new. Its like, during your period the teacher will check your sketches and say this is ok this is not.⁵²³

In the third image Gyatso appears as a refugee in India, painting the Dalai Lama in the manner expected by the conservative majority of the Tibetan exile community in India. The makeshift shed and furnishings attest to the transient and uncertain nature of this phase in time. As previously mentioned, Gyatso returned from art school in Beijing and taught at the Tibet University for a number of years. He left Tibet in 1992 after a period of increased unrest in Lhasa, and he struggled with the decision to leave. His closeness to his family, loyalty to his students and feelings of powerlessness were offset by his desire for freedom of creativity and the pull of the established Tibetan enclave in India where the Dalai Lama lived in exile.⁵²⁴ He says:

The demonstrations in Lhasa in 1989 strengthened my desire to find out more about Tibet in political and historical terms. By that time the period of liberalization was over, and even making the images as I painted them became dangerous and, so I went underground. I felt confused, lonely and lost, like a child without a parent. I wondered what Tibetans who lived outside of Tibet were like and what the Dalai Lama thought of contemporary Tibetan art ... hoping to fill the void I felt, to find my roots, I moved to India, to Dharamsala, where the main Tibetan exiled community is found today.⁵²⁵

⁵²³ Conversation with Gonkar Gyatso, Brisbane, 21 August 2011.

⁵²⁴ Conversation with Gonkar Gyatso, Sydney, 2010.

⁵²⁵ G. Gyatso. “No Man’s Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet,” 148–149.

In Dharamsala, Gyatso studied traditional *thangka* painting, but privately pursued his own artistic expressions. However, Gyatso came into conflict with the traditional Tibetan artistic establishment who disapproved of his contemporary art forms, particularly the images of the Buddha that did not comply with the strict iconometric rules of composition. Gyatso felt that he had merely exchanged one ideology for another and to symbolize this, he portrays himself in the third image painting the Dalai Lama. Gyatso had fled to India as part of the second wave of exiles and it became evident that a cultural gap had opened up between these new exiles and those who had fled Tibet with the Dalai Lama a generation before:

... as an artist who had created a new style in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, I soon discovered that not only was my background unknown, but no one understood my art either: Dharamsala was not prepared for the “shock of the new.” Modernism is unacceptable in Dharamsala—it is seen as yet another foreign art style inspired by China, which reveals a treacherous inclination on the part of the artist. According to the exiled community, anything new is not really ‘Tibetan’. Thus there is a tension between the modernist style created in the TAR (Tibetan Autonomous Region) and the demand in Dharamsala for ‘traditionalism’ of a special kind. Tibetans in exile are just not interested in modern art. They feel that an artist has a religious and political duty to maintain traditional culture.⁵²⁶

Gyatso says that while he was in Tibet his modernist style had been a survival tactic, but that in exile in India it was unmarketable. It only caused him to become marginalized and rejected by the community with which he sought refuge.⁵²⁷ Gyatso’s personal artistic vision was at odds with both Chinese communist ideology and the traditional Tibetan exile community.

Gyatso was the first of the exile Tibetan artists to participate in Tibetan contemporary art exhibitions in China. When *My Identity* was shown as part of the *Lhasa*

⁵²⁶ G. Gyatso. “No Man’s Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet,” 149.

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

– *New Art from Tibet* exhibition at Red Gate Gallery in Beijing in 2007, the third image was intentionally omitted from the exhibition and the catalogue, because it featured an image of the Dalai Lama.⁵²⁸ Although the work explores Gyatso's questions regarding his journey and identity it is also a political work, but without the third image the full implications and meanings of the work are incomplete. The catalogue for the exhibition leaves a blank space where the third image should be, and its conspicuous absence must have surely raised questions. Ironically, the removal of the third image enforces the point of ideological management by power. The decision to leave out the third photograph was arrived at after discussions with the Australian gallery owner and curator in Beijing, and not because he was told to by the authorities.⁵²⁹ In the West, Gyatso's pursuit of his art is unrestricted. However, when working in China he returns to the habit of self-censorship that the Lhasan artists deal with constantly.

In the fourth tableau, Gyatso represents the contemporary Tibetan in exile in a Western flat with a minimalist sensibility of décor, reflecting the 'White Cube' aesthetic of the modern London art gallery. The painting before him is an ethereal and abstract *maṇḍala* hovering in a Rothkoesque cosmos. Gone are the precise intricacies of the traditional iconography and what remains is an impressionist *maṇḍala*. Now that the artist is no longer subject to the strict complexities of the iconometric rules and political ideologies, he is free to explore new ideas and methods in art as well as his own identity as a cosmopolitan Tibetan and transnational artist. In Dharamsala, Peter Towse, a lecturer at St Martin's School of Art and Design in London, was able to arrange a scholarship for

⁵²⁸ Conversation with Gonkar Gyatso, Sydney, 2010. And see Oliva Sand. "Profile: the Tibetan artists Gonkar Gyatso," *Asian Art*. (Dec. 2009, 2–3), 3.

⁵²⁹ Gyatso received his British passport in 2004 and was therefore able to travel to China under this passport. For Tibetans in exile who do not have a foreign passport it is impossible to enter China. Gyatso now keeps a studio presence in Beijing.

Gyatso.⁵³⁰ However, the move to London was not an easy one. It took a number of years before he ultimately found his own voice again. In 2003, the year he created the *My Identity* series, he wrote:

In the West, now, I am learning how to free myself from my indoctrinated education, from any preconceived system, not only as a human being, but more specifically, in my case, as an artist. I want to be able to reach the freedom of expression that Western artists have enjoyed for a long time. But the freedom I have met in the West can be confusing as well as exciting because too many choices make for no choice.⁵³¹

By presenting himself in a 'white cube' Gyatso is alluding to the fact that even the political and social freedom in the West does not exclude the presence of an art ideology; that of market forces, the caprice of fashion, and the art critic.

Gyatso writes of his journey across many borders: national, political and stylistic. He feels that his journey has brought him to a 'no-man's land' where he is still in search of his true identity. He believes that true identity is revealed by cleaving to markers of one's own culture. Like many of the contemporary Tibetan artists, he sees the process as the beginning of a new hybrid Tibetan culture and identity.⁵³² Gyatso eschews the constraints of cultural stereotypes, but insists that his Tibetanness is his essence. To remain true to himself he has no choice but to draw from his own cultural tradition. And indeed, in the fourth image the word 'Tibet' tattooed on his arm in the script of his mother tongue, declares that he remains indelibly Tibetan.

While this work has been interpreted by Clare Harris as challenging audiences on their differing versions of the Tibetan stereotype,⁵³³ I suggest that Gyatso is asking

⁵³⁰ Peter Towse. "The long story to a special meeting." In *Oh! What a beautiful day, Peter Towse and Gonkar Gyatso's shared vision* (London: Anna Maria Rossi & Fabio Rossi Publications: 2006). See also Donald Dinwiddie. *Gonkar Gyatso, Contours of Identity*. Artasiapacific (Issue 63, May/Jun 2009, 132–139).

⁵³¹ G. Gyatso. "No Man's Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet," 150.

⁵³² Ibid., 151; and conversation with artist, Sydney 2010.

⁵³³ Harris. "The Buddha goes global: some thoughts towards a transnational art history." *Art History* (September 2006: 698–720), 710, 712.

questions of himself: is this me, or is this me, would this have been me? And how do I reconcile these different me's? Gyatso's main purpose in creating this work was to expose certain parallels in the role of artist in each situation. In Dharamsala, Gyatso found that the ideological purpose served by the artist was not dissimilar to that inside the TAR. In both cases, he found himself serving the agenda of the controlling elite.⁵³⁴ There was no room for self-exploration through art in either case. As Diana Baldon observes, the transformations of the artist in the images "ask who, and what, has the power to control forms of iconization beyond time."⁵³⁵

Baldon argues that Gyatso is attempting to show how divergent artistic traditions or systems (such as traditional Tibetan *thangka* painting or Chinese Communist Socialist Realism) can be turned into highly politicized tools that promote ideologies, by both religion and a totalitarian regime.⁵³⁶ Gyatso came to this realization during his journey and experienced a disillusionment which caused him to continue his search.⁵³⁷

In the year he completed this work Gyatso wrote "I am still in search of my true identity."⁵³⁸ As such, it epitomises the experience of all the Tibetan artists in exile discussed in this thesis.⁵³⁹ Perhaps this experience is best summed up by the following quote from another diaspora artist, Kesang Lamdark, who was born in Tibet, brought up in Switzerland, educated in Switzerland and America, and lives and works in Switzerland:

I search to find an appropriate cultural space for myself, but always felt like an outsider. Eventually, looking within, I came to understand and reconnect with my heritage while still living in the West. My displaced multi-cultural upbringing allowed me a more broad personal energy.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁴ Conversation with Gonkar Gyatso, Sydney 2010.

⁵³⁵ Diana Baldon. "Style exercises in self-identification." In *A Question of Evidence* (exhibition) Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (Vienna, 2008, 140–141), 140.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ G. Gyatso. "No Man's Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet," 147–160.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁵³⁹ Gyatso has more recently added a fifth image to this series, "*My Identity No. 5*" (2014), in which the artist is painting a portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi.

⁵⁴⁰ Kesang Lamdark. "Statement." http://www.lamdak.com/popup_text/statement1.html (n.d.).

Likewise, Losang Gyatso, based in America, feels that both in exile and in Tibet, Tibetans have to continually deal with being part of a larger society:

... the larger culture of the U.S. is something we have to confront and live with and negotiate as our lives change. And in Tibet also, Chinese culture, Chinese presence is so looming that you are constantly negotiating what you are, who you are becoming, and what compromises you are willing to make.⁵⁴¹

Lhasa – Erosion of Culture

Because the work of the diaspora artists often depicts an exploration of the metaphysical and spiritual journey and the continual negotiation of Tibetan or hybrid identity in a non-Tibetan society, it is often autobiographical – such as Gyato's *My Identity* (fig. 121), Tenzing Rigdol's *My Exilic Experience* (fig. 100) and Tashi Norbu's *Adventure of My Life* (fig. 35). By contrast, the artists in Lhasa produce work that acts as an anthropological record of a culture in transition. The erosion or dilution of Tibetan culture within Tibet is a recurring theme for the Lhasan artists as the new, dominant culture is the result of the outside forces of foreign occupation and globalization. This is not a theme that has immediate personal experience for the artists of the diaspora although they would not be unaware or disinterested in the issues concerning Tibetan life in the TAR. However, their situations find them concerned with navigating a path through the dominant culture of their new circumstances that allows them to adapt and retain their own identities. While artists in the diaspora may receive news about political and social life in Tibet, their remoteness means that they do not experience the quotidian minutiae of life there. They are not present and therefore cannot examine, in their work, the everyday issues that affect the lives of ordinary Tibetans in Lhasa. While they do comment on big

⁵⁴¹ Losang Gyatso, video interview, "Losang Gysatso discusses *Tradition Transformed*," 2010, *Art Babble*. <http://www.artbabble.org/video/rubin/losang-gysatso-discusses-tradition-transformed>.

questions that affect Tibet, such as minorities, self-determination and globalisation, their approach is necessarily confined to the intellectual, philosophical and emotional.

Tsewang Tashi's exhibition *Untitled Identity* (2009) exemplifies the concerns of the Lhasan artists discussed in this thesis: the challenge to the Tibetan stereotypes and the hybrid identity assumed by the younger generations of Tibetans.



Figure 123. *Beer Seller No. 1*, Figure 124. *Beer Seller No. 2*, Figure 125. *Wine Seller No. 1*,
2009, Tsewang Tashi, oil on canvas, 146 x 97 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

In a series of portraits of young modern Tibetan women (figs. 123, 124, 125) that were part of the *Untitled Identity* exhibition, Tashi focuses on the person. There are no explicit symbols of Tibetanness. They exemplify the new urban lifestyle and pervading commercialism dominated by Chinese and Western culture. In seeking to capture the essence of modern Tibet, Tashi set about painting what was right in front of him without editorializing.⁵⁴² Tashi comments:

Like the girls selling beer in bars these days ... this is not Tibetan, the beer comes from all over the world, but this is also real life here. These are young local girls, but they are involved in things far beyond Lhasa ...⁵⁴³

⁵⁴² Conversation with Tsewang Tashi, artist's studio, Lhasa, 2012.

⁵⁴³ Tsewang Tashi (quoted in "Canvas Lucida," by Kabir Mansingh Heimsath in *Untitled Identity* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2009, 8–16), 15).

The girl in *Beer Seller No. 1*, wears a Budweiser logo, an American brand of beer. Her uniform also bears the symbol of the Olympic rings, promoting the 2012 Olympic Games in Beijing which was to be the subject of many pro-independent Tibet demonstrations around the world. The young woman in *Beer Seller No. 2* is promoting Chill Beer by Carlsberg (Danish).

Wine Seller No. 1 features the brand of the Great Wall wine company, one of the largest producers of wine in China. Great Wall red and white wine can be purchased in convenience stores all over China from Beijing to Lhasa and the Gobi Desert (I can attest). The Western custom of drinking grape wine is becoming more common in China these days, and international brands of beer have largely replaced traditional Tibetan beer (*chang*⁵⁴⁴) in cities like Lhasa.

Like beverage promotion models all over the world, the young women in the portraits wear uniforms of the global companies they work for. As Tashi says, these young Tibetan women have become part of something beyond Lhasa. They have joined the global family of consumerism and commercialization as Lhasa becomes more homogenised under the influence of China and the West.

The artists in Lhasa are documenting their society through direct observation of changing Tibetan life. Their physical proximity means that they can record what they see around them, allowing an audience to glimpse the realities of modern Tibet. We are presented with images of modern Tibetans negotiating their identities in a changing environment and, indeed, a Tibet that is collectively trying to define itself in the modern world, as we see in Gade's *New Tibet* (2006), for example. The dialectical tension between two interconnected concepts of identity, the Chinese Tibet and the Tibetan Tibet,

⁵⁴⁴ Tibetan beer or *chang* is made from fermented barley, one of the few crops that can be grown at such high altitudes.

is ever-present. Whilst the Chinese presence and influence in Tibet is irrevocable, the artists from Lhasa work to ensure that their culture survives in some form that continues a lineage but expresses the modernity of their experience. As Joseph Kosuth expressed it: “The artist perpetuates his culture by maintaining certain features of it by ‘using them’.”⁵⁴⁵ The artist is a model of the anthropologist *engaged*.

The different context within which the artists in Lhasa work impacts on their art in other ways as well, such as the greater constraints and scrutiny under which they work. As mentioned earlier, while artists in the diaspora such as Gonkar Gyatso have had to self-censor their work when it has been exhibited in China, this kind of self-censorship is something that artists in exile rarely have to contend with. However, it is something that the artists in Lhasa have to consider constantly. The result is that the Lhasan artists often use coded or cryptic visual language whereas the artists in exile may directly confront political issues or events if they so wish. This self-censorship contributes to the erosion of culture in Tibet, as does censorship anywhere, because it allows only one biased version of history or the present.

While the artists in Lhasa are not stood over and told what to paint and what not to paint, as Gonkar Gyatso remembered from his university days in Beijing, their work suggests a certain amount of self-censorship. Sensitive subjects are avoided or are concealed within the work in coded language, as we have seen in such works as, *Railway Train* (fig. 69), *New Tibet* (fig. 73) and *Ice Buddha Sculpture – Lhasa River* (fig. 19) by Gade, *Buddha Head* (fig. 20) and *Paper Plane* (fig. 21) by Nyandak, *Letters* (fig. 119) and *Zen Meditation* (fig. 120) by Nortse, as well as *Floating River Ice* (fig. 111) by Benchung.

⁵⁴⁵ Joseph Kosuth. *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991), 117.

By contrast, artists in the diaspora have been able to deal with such contentious issues as the self-immolations of Tibetan monks protesting Chinese occupation. In his work, *Alone, Exhausted and Waiting*, 2012 (fig. 126), Tenzing Rigdol fuses the iconography of the reclining Buddha in *parinirvāṇa* with the image of a Tibetan monk on fire. The resulting work is both aesthetically beautiful and full of pathos. The reclining Buddha represents the Buddha at the moment of his death and achieving complete *nirvāṇa*. It is thus implied that the death of the monk will result in the achievement of his own *nirvāṇa*, however it also suggests support for the Tibetan independence movement. It is not a subject that could be easily explored by an artist in Lhasa.

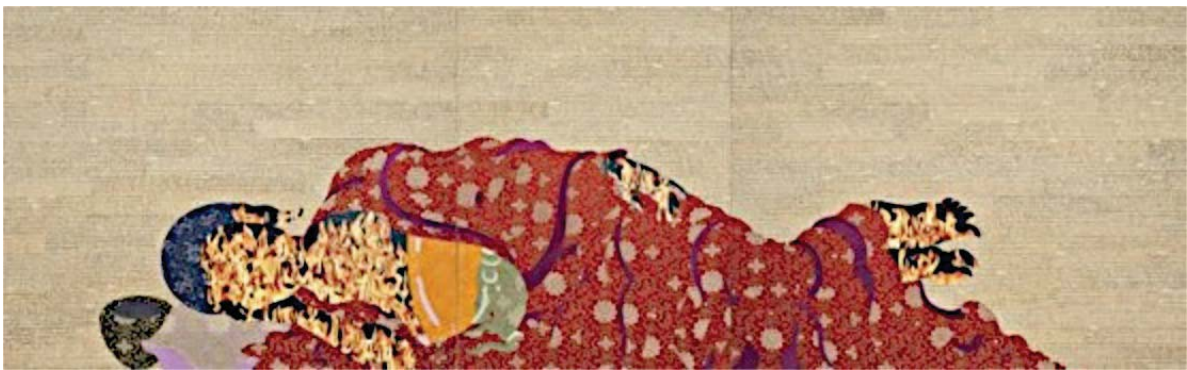


Figure 126. *Alone, Exhausted and Waiting*, 2012, Tenzing Rigdol, collage, silk brocade & scripture, 122 x 396 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

Losang Gyatso, who like Rigdol is based in the United States of America, has also been affected the protests by monks in Tibet. His series of photographic works, *Labrang 1–6* (fig. 127) and *Jokhang 1–6* (2008) are based on news footage; freeze framed and digitally processed, then printed on aluminium sheets. The events captured are from two protests and demonstrations by monks inside Tibet at temples in different locations in 2008; one at the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa and the other at Labrang monastery in North-eastern Tibet.

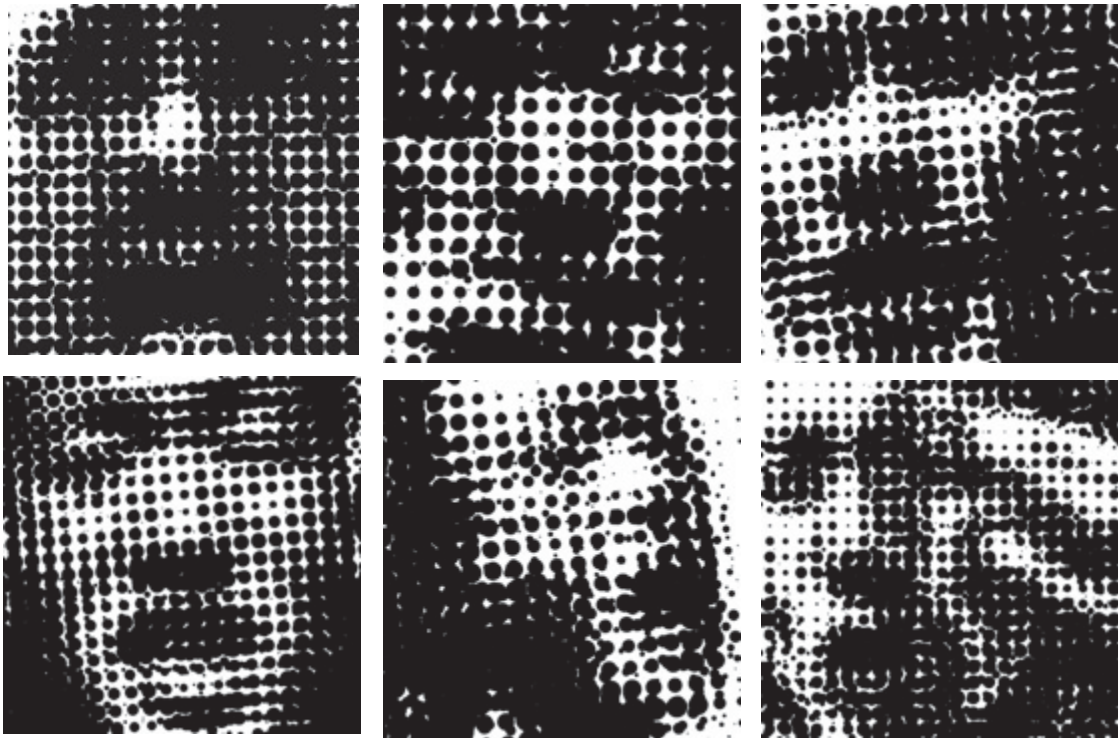


Figure 127. *Labrang 1-6*, 2008, Losang Gyatso, digital images on aluminium (Tibet House, Amsterdam)

For Gyatso, the footage captures the energy, anxiety and adrenalin written on the faces of the young monks who, he believes, have courageously and heroically broken through the silence.⁵⁴⁶ Distilled from moving images, the original energy of the footage is revived in the frozen frames by the digital process producing a kinetic effect, particularly when the works are seen in their totality, that is, all twelve frames. The power of these works lies in the ghost image, which is a particularly poignant device in this instance, revealing the usually unseen anonymous faces. The abstract dimension of the works creates a remove from immediate context and at the same time powerfully reminds us of the universality of the human condition: oppression and the will to resist.⁵⁴⁷

Most directly, however, these works reflect a particular reality of contemporary Tibetan society. As Gyatso says:

... sometimes it feels like making art, whether its visual arts or film and video or even writing fiction, seems highly superficial, inadequate in the face of the

⁵⁴⁶ Losang Gyatso, Interview with Simonetta Ronconi (audio) *Tibet Art Now*, Amsterdam, 2009. <http://www.tibethouse.nl/tan/interview.htm>.

⁵⁴⁷ Email communication with Losang Gyatso, June 2010.

tremendous political and human rights issues that Tibetan people are facing ... So it seems like there's a disconnect between making art and the Tibetan situation but I really sincerely believe that there's a role for art, literature and films that Tibetans produce ... in creating a future Tibetan society⁵⁴⁸

It is not possible for the artists in Lhasa to create works that obviously refer to such politically sensitive events. Yet we see the possibilities in the work by Losang Gyatso, which is so abstracted that it has the capacity to conceal its true import.

Perhaps the only work by a Lhasan artist that overtly touches on taboo subject matter is by Nyandak, as mentioned in the introduction. The protests in Tibet in 2008 were the largest and most serious since the 1980s, and Nyandak witnessed the violence first-hand. Cars and shops were set on fire and armed police clashed with Tibetan protestors. Tanks patrolled the streets.⁵⁴⁹ The footage of the monks used by Losang Gyatso in his digital works were part of the larger protest which started in Lhasa and spread to other parts of Tibet and the subsequent crack-down by authorities. The riots in Lhasa inspired Nyandak to create *Middle Path*, 2008 (fig. 128), which was exhibited in London in 2008 in Nyandak's solo exhibition *The Lightness of Being*.⁵⁵⁰



Figure 128. *Middle Path*, 2008, Nyandak, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 80 x 127.5 cm (Rossi & Rossi, London)

⁵⁴⁸ Email communication with Losang Gyatso, June 2010.

⁵⁴⁹ Jim Yardley. "Violence in Tibet as Monks Clash With the Police." *New York Times*. 18 March 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/15/world/asia/15tibet.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

⁵⁵⁰ Nyandak's 2010 work entitled *Boy No. 2*, which depicts a boy standing in front of a miniature tank, formed part of the *Scorching Sun of Tibet* exhibition in Beijing in 2010.

In the midst of the riots, Nyandak was moved by a boy prostrating in religious observance. Prostration is a ritual in Tibetan Buddhist worship and pilgrimage and is performed by thousands everyday around the Jokhang temple in Lhasa. On normal days it a common sight. In the context of violence, however, the act struck Nyandak as both incongruous and a powerful statement of faith in Tibetan religion and culture rather than an act of submission. Nyandak places the child in a desolate and featureless landscape that is characteristic of his work from that period. The child prostrates before some miniature tanks while fire and smoke streak the horizon. For us in the West, Nyandak's image brings to mind the 'unknown protestor' standing before the tanks in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, in 1989.

When Nyandak was questioned about this work by the authorities he explained that it was not a political comment on events or the Chinese regime, but that he was merely expressing his emotions at witnessing the riots.⁵⁵¹ With regard to the painting *Middle Path*, he says:

The child, I feel, is innocence – a bit like civilians and ordinary people caught in the middle of these problems. Just innocent, and it is the big ideas that clash, and somehow nobody can see the middle way.⁵⁵²

However, despite Nyandak's disavowal of political intent, the presence of the armoured tanks in this work is quite startling, more so than if the work was by a diaspora artist.

Like Nyandak, many of the contemporary Tibetan artists do not want to be regarded as political artists. The artists in Lhasa are well aware of what artistic subject matter will be tolerated and what will not in the current political climate. Religious themes, forbidden during the Cultural Revolution, are now tolerated (as long as the image

⁵⁵¹ Conversation with Nyandak, Lhasa 2010.

⁵⁵² Ibid.

of the Dalai Lama is not depicted). This volte-face by authorities has provided a way for the artists to reconnect with their heritage and attempt to reclaim their visual culture from an occupying foreign force. Also, since the repudiation of the Cultural Revolution by the Communist Party after Mao's death, it is now permissible to be critical of it. For the artists in Lhasa who grew up during this era, the imagery of the Cultural Revolution has merged with traditional Tibetan iconography as part of their common history and common heritage with the Chinese and they are now able to employ it in a more self-reflexive manner than before as we have seen for example in Gade's *Mao Jacket* (fig. 16), *Thousands Bound* (fig. 17), *Raging Fire* (fig. 48) as well as *Red Sun, Black Sun* (figs. 38 and 39) and *Mandala–The State of Unbalance* (fig. 40) by Nortse and *The Red Decade* (fig. 49) by Ang Sang. Indeed, Chinese artistic influence on Tibetan art goes back many centuries. The addition of Cultural Revolution motifs to Tibetan art serves to perpetuate the historical narrative. It is yet to be seen if these motifs will endure or prove an ephemeral indication of a particular point on the historical trajectory.

By contrast, the language of the Cultural Revolution occurs rarely in the work of the diaspora artists. Whether the artists left Tibet when they were very young, or were born outside Tibet or whether they left Tibet as adults, their imagery generally derives from a traditional artistic base, modified and enhanced by influences from Western art, whether in iconography, materials or techniques.

Transnational – Beyond Tibetan Identity

There are particular challenges facing contemporary Tibetan artists in the international context. While the visibility of marginal artists and emerging movements, such as the contemporary Tibetan art movement, continues to grow, these artists can remain locked into the very essentialist version of identity that they attempt to resist.

Despite the efflorescence of hybridities in a transnational art world, along with the diversity of art practices of Asian artists, these artists still tend to be characterised mainly with reference to their national or ethnic identities. Moreover, the idea of ‘tradition’ continues to frame the discussion around Asian modernities.⁵⁵³ However, while issues of Tibetan identity are important for these artists, as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, their work also addresses issues of global concern. Their concern is not simply to preserve tradition but to show how it is relevant to addressing global issues such as consumerism, globalisation and environmental damage. Indeed, cultural identity is a global issue. Tibetan identity and culture are being used as a metaphor for the loss of traditional culture in a globalised world as, for example, Nortse has expressed with regard to his work *Letters* (fig. 119).

In the case of contemporary Tibetan art, the movement is still in its infancy and the number of artists is relatively small when compared to some other Asian countries such as India or Japan. As John Clark notes, the typical Asian modernity begins with the historical break of colonial or neo-colonial rule and the reaction against this, so it is not surprising that contemporary Tibetan artists still draw from a repertoire of iconic cultural symbols as a means of self definition, but at the same time they seek to imbue these symbols with a significance which goes beyond their role as signifiers of national identity.⁵⁵⁴ There are, of course, many variations and analogous circumstances, and Tibet’s story comprises its own constellation of these historical and political elements.

Within Tibet, the artists are consciously reacting to an overpowering exogenous force that had arrogated control of the visual culture of Tibet to itself. Indeed, it is within their own lifetimes that the Tibetan artists have seen the change in government policy which allowed them to explore their Tibetan cultural heritage. In the circumstances, it is

⁵⁵³ Gennifer Weisenfeld. “Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World,” in *Transcultural Studies* (Vol. 1, 2010, 78-99).

⁵⁵⁴ John Clark, “Asian Modernisms,” In *Humanities Research Journal* (Series 2, 1999, (ANU), 5–14), 8.

unsurprising that the artists are drawn to tradition. At the same time, Tibet has been catapulted into modernity and a forced unequal marriage. The result is a double-consciousness,⁵⁵⁵ in which the Tibetan and Chinese worldviews are in a constant state of tension, that raises questions of authenticity. A return to the past is impossible and attempts to resurrect a purely traditional visual culture (as has occurred in Dharamsala) may be seen as an inauthentic construct. The artists in Lhasa have asserted a neo-traditional⁵⁵⁶ art form, which derives from their double-consciousness, with their roots in a Tibetan past and their feet in a globalised present. Losang Gyatso does not see any contradiction in the direction of contemporary Tibetan art. Gyatso, who believes that Tibetans are constantly re-negotiating identity in a changing world, feels that he is “at the front end of a process that began hundreds of years ago.”⁵⁵⁷ For Gyatso then, the process that he is a part of is an organic one rather than a construct.

Nevertheless, as John Clark proposes, there has been a prolonged inability in the West to accept Asian art modernisms that appropriate forms that originated in the West as authentic.⁵⁵⁸ Consequently, non-Western art has been segregated and framed in terms of ethnicity, culture and tradition. In a globalised art world, the boundaries are more pervious and many of the Tibetan artists, even in Lhasa, have connections with international art dealers who curate exhibitions of their work around the world, even if the artist is not always able to travel freely to those exhibitions.

Those Tibetan artists who are situated in the West have greater access to the international art scene. Yet in that milieu, like other non-Western artists, they are often seen as marginal or ethnic. In addition, the Tibetan artists, along with other artists who

⁵⁵⁵ Dorothy J. Hale. “Bakhtin in African American Literary Theory.” In *ELH* (Vol. 61, No. 2, Summer, 1994, 445–471), 446.

⁵⁵⁶ John Clark. “Asian Modernisms,” 7.

⁵⁵⁷ Losang Gyatso, video interview, “Losang Gysatso discusses *Tradition Transformed*,” 2010, *Art Babble*. <http://www.artbabble.org/video/rubin/losang-gysatso-discusses-tradition-transformed>.

⁵⁵⁸ John Clark, “Open and Closed Discourses of Modernity Asian Art,” In *Modernity in Asian Art*. John Clark, ed (Sydney: University of Sydney East Asian Studies No. 7, Wild Peony), 2007.

have sought refuge in the West, are often propelled into artistic discussions around asylum and human rights. Indeed, in 2003 Gonkar Gyatso joined a collective called “Artists in Exile”, a Glasgow based association of artists from around the world, for an exhibition entitled *Sanctuary, Contemporary Art & Human Rights*.⁵⁵⁹ Then in 2008, he took part in an exhibition called *A Question of Evidence*⁵⁶⁰ comprised of work by artists who commented on issues such as identity politics, human rights, democratic reform and restriction of free expression.⁵⁶¹

Alex Rotas argues that while refugee artists have the ability to express and represent the human experience, they are burdened with the responsibility of representing human displacement in a community that is alien to them. Moreover, the expectation is that the refugee artists may only express that displacement and nothing else. It is as if their refugee status is also their artistic genre. They may not simply be ‘artist’, a designation reserved for the artists of the host nation alone.⁵⁶²

I would argue that, at this point in time, the importance of the subject matter in a world experiencing a constantly escalating refugee crisis now serves to elevate the status of these artists beyond the quaint, ethnic, refugee artist. They join together with other artists from around the world, so it is now an international group courted by prestigious galleries and museums.⁵⁶³ Kesang Lamdark, Gonkar Gyatso and Palden Weinreb, for example, all see themselves as part of the international art scene rather than simply Tibetan artists, although their Tibetan identities remain important to them personally.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁵⁹ Donald Dinwiddie. *Gonkar Gyatso, Contours of Identity*. In *Artasiapacific*, (Issue 63, May/Jun 2009, 132–139), 137. *Sanctuary, Contemporary Art & Human Rights* (Glasgow: Glasgow Museums, 2003).

⁵⁶⁰ *A Question of Evidence*. Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (Vienna, 2008).

⁵⁶¹ Daniela Zyman & Diana Baldon. *A Question of Evidence* (exhibition) Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (Vienna, 2008, 12–19), 12.

⁵⁶² Alex Rotas, ‘Is Refugee art Possible?’, *Third Text* (18:1, 2004, 51–60), 52–53.

⁵⁶³ Gennifer Weisenfeld. “Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World,” in *Transcultural Studies*, (Vol. 1, 2010, 78–99), 87.

⁵⁶⁴ Kesang Lamdark, Gonkar Gyatso, Palden Weinreb. “Symposium at Rossi & Rossi, London, UK, 2008.” *At Mechak Centre for Contemporary Tibetan Art*. www.mechakgallery.com/symposium_at_rossi__rossi_london.html.

The question of whether he sees himself as an international artist, a Tibetan artist, or both, is a subject about which Gyatso has given a lot of thought:

... that's one of the arguments I'm always struggling with. I'm an international artist, but in some ways my work is even more Tibetan, so that's something I do struggle with. My situation has allowed me to be international or transnational. Tibetan-ness is something I can't get rid of ... I am still Tibetan, but compared with Lhasa I am much further than that.⁵⁶⁵

For the Lhasan artists, the challenge to be taken seriously in the contemporary art world is even greater than their diaspora colleagues. Firstly, they are far removed from the artistic centre, and are also in a situation with stricter controls on movement and expression. Despite these obstacles, many Lhasan artists have been able to travel and study abroad, mix with other artists and exhibit internationally. Benchung and Tsewang Tashi have both studied at Oslo University in Norway, and travelled to mainland Europe. Nyandak and Nortse have undertaken artist's residencies in California in 2011, and both these artists lived for sometime in Dharamsala, India, during the Open Door era of the 1980s, before returning to Tibet. They strive to create work that expresses their own truths and yet, at the same time, may be universal and relevant on a world stage. Both Ang Sang and Nortse expressed to me the intention for their art to be international and universal, and not merely national and 'Tibetan'.⁵⁶⁶ As Nortse has commented, the references to Tibetan language in some of his works do not arise only because he is Tibetan and loves the Tibetan language. But rather that "this kind of culture is part of our world, so its not out of ... personal attachment or nationalistic approach ... its not nationalistic at all. It's more kind of international, humanitarian ..."⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁵ Conversation with Gonkar Gyatso, Brisbane, 21 August 2011.

⁵⁶⁶ Conversations with Ang Sang and Nortse, Lhasa, 2010

⁵⁶⁷ Conversation with Nortse, Lhasa 2010.

Being identified as Tibetan or refugee artists may be something that Gonkar Gyatso and other Tibetan artists will perhaps always struggle with. However, it is clear that, with the proliferation of exhibitions like *Sanctuary* and *A Question of Evidence*, together with regular events such as the Asia Pacific Triennale in Brisbane, and the promotion of marginal artists by galleries such as Rossi and Rossi in London, the status of these artists, both in exile and in Lhasa, has changed.

The centre–periphery paradigm has indeed changed for both the contemporary Tibetan artist in exile and at home. As Nicolas Bourriaud has said, “artists are now starting from a globalized state of culture.”⁵⁶⁸ Modern methods of communication, media and networking mean that local artists are not isolated, even in Tibet. They are connected and are aware of issues affecting local places as well as international events. Not only do they participate in group exhibitions in different parts of the world, such as Asia, Australia and Europe, they can combine to participate in web exhibitions via the internet. This democratizing medium is now part of global culture in which all can participate on an equal basis.

According to Bourriaud, a new modernity is emerging that is reconfigured to globalization and can be understood in economic, political and cultural terms. Bourriaud calls this phenomenon an ‘altermodern culture’. In altermodern culture, everyone is “the other” (*alter* is Latin for ‘other’). As we have seen, and as Bourriaud states, artists are responding to the new globalized perception: “[t]hey traverse a cultural landscape saturated with signs and create new pathways between multiple formats of expression and communication.”⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, “Altermodern explained: manifesto,” *Altermodern* at Tate Britain, Tate Triennial, 2009. <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern/explain-altermodern/altermodern-explained-manifesto>.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

Bourriaud proposes that we are on the precipice of this new era, leaving behind the postmodern period and the failure of the multicultural model which, rather than engendering plurality, propagated an essentialist view of difference. According to Bourriaud, under this postmodern multicultural model, the meaning of a work of art was crucially connected to the social background of its production, reducing the artist's identity to their origins. This approach, Bourriaud says, is in crisis and must be called into question.

Writing at the end of last century, Homi Bhabha was already proclaiming the imminence of a new age and looking for ways to define and describe it. According to Bhabha, we were living on the borderlines of the 'present' for which no other term had been devised except by the addition of the prefix 'post'.⁵⁷⁰ More than two decades later, the search continues for labels and terminology to define and classify phenomena of the present. Bourriaud's solution is 'altermodern'.

The altermodern does not cling to the linear narrative of history. Bourriaud defines altermodernism as the moment that human history could be properly seen as being constituted of multiple temporalities, or a state of heterochrony⁵⁷¹ in the Foucauldian sense of co-existing slices of time.⁵⁷² According to Bourriaud, heterochronia questions the notion of what is considered contemporary. What he proposes is "a disorientation through an art form exploring all dimensions of the present, tracing lines in all directions of time and space."⁵⁷³ The altermodern artist is nomadic,⁵⁷⁴ related to experiences of migration, displacement and exile, creating a language that is not limited by nationalisms, and is engaged in a network of global dialogues.

⁵⁷⁰ Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1.

⁵⁷¹ Nicolas Bourriaud. *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 13; and <http://www2.tate.org.uk/altermodern/explore.shtm>.

⁵⁷² Michel Foucault. "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias." *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46-49, 48.

⁵⁷³ Nicolas Bourriaud. *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 13.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

In the last two decades the contemporary Tibetan art movement has progressed from an embryonic stage to a mature art movement. The artists are to varying extents nomadic, they criss-cross the world both physically and virtually. They participate in Biennales and Triennials and group art shows of both Tibetan artists and larger plural art events in the West and in Asia. Moreover, their art practices reflect a state of globalisation. The disparate nature of the art movement, with artists as far apart as Europe, America, Australia and Lhasa, renders it a truly global movement. While the artists in exile have greater access to global news and information, the artists in Lhasa do not seem as cut off from the world as they would have been only two decades ago. They are represented by the same agents as their exile confreres and are concerned with similar global issues.

Conclusion

This study has largely confined itself to the iconographic aspects of contemporary Tibetan art which inextricably link Tibetan Buddhism with Tibetan culture. The research focuses on artists who draw from the iconography of traditional Tibetan art, and their cultural and religious heritage, modifying it in a way that renders it more relevant to modern life in both exile and in Tibet.

As I have demonstrated in this thesis the artists considered here, far from being iconoclasts, use traditional iconography in profound ways. It is indicative of the heavy significance of these symbols that they can be used to carry profound meanings in the present, as they did in the past. The result is a fusion of ideas and styles that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries. As mentioned in my introduction, Nicholas Bourriaud has proposed that the new starting point for many contemporary artists is one of a globalised state of culture, so that while ethnic identity and cultural origins are still important, the context is one where different influences all play a potentially equal part in the global flow of ideas. Indeed, the contemporary Tibetan artists can be seen as part of the greater transnational art movement, as artists from both Lhasa and the exile community join forces in international exhibitions in, for example, Hong Kong, India, Australia, Germany and London. These exhibitions can be accessed via the world wide web, sometimes with the capacity for interactive blog communication, as in the case of the *Tradition Transformed* exhibition in New York in 2010.

The contemporary Tibetan art movement emerged from the fringes to come to realisation in the prestigious galleries of the West, presenting hybrid art forms, part spiritual, part ethnic. Whether they are situated in the TAR or form part of the Tibetan diaspora, they are equally represented at Biennales along with other transnational artists

of every background, engaging in a global dialogue and a vision of human civilisation as one of plurality and diversity.

For a culture in transition, these are the spaces opened up by the contemporary Tibetan artists, as Homi Bhabha articulates, in the on-going process of re-negotiating identity. For ‘minority’ artists such as these, who form a cosmopolitan elite in their communities, the negotiated spaces open a gap for others to follow in a rapidly changing world, not only for Tibetans but also non-Tibetans who, through engaging with these artworks, can respond to a Tibetan identity beyond the cultural stereotypes. In terms of Said’s Orientalism, the ‘altermodern’ would appear to provide an antidote – if we all become ‘the other’.

I have examined how the changed cultural context within which the Tibetan artists now operate has impacted on the iconographic, mythological and stylistic features of Tibetan art. Through an employment of Panofsky’s methodology of iconographic analysis, I have sought to interpret the work of these artists through the lens of this context as well as the artists’ own stated intentions, in order to temper the subjective nature of interpreting another’s cultural manifestations.

The contemporary Tibetan artists I have discussed now operate largely in two contexts, which both represent a significant cultural change from the pre-Chinese occupation Tibetan society. These are the present day Tibetan Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China, and a life in exile in other parts of Asia or the West. Both these circumstances represent a marked change in the cultural milieu. In the first instance, dominating foreign cultural influences have been imported into the traditional Tibetan homeland while in the second instance, individuals or groups are transported into the midst of a foreign culture.

Both situations have, as we have seen, involved a hiatus with regard to access to cultural knowledge for different reasons, and then a resurgence in interest and cultural activity once access had been restored. In the TAR, this occurred after the death of Mao and the ushering in of the 'Open Door' policy of the 1980s when restrictions on the practice of culture were alleviated to an extent. In exile, the awareness of Tibetan history and religion has built up over time thanks largely to the Dalai Lama and the community in India which has preserved knowledge and exported it to the West. This has led in some quarters to priority being given to the preservation of traditions and thus a new efflorescence of traditional arts. However, in the case of the contemporary Tibetan artists, their personal and collective journeys have resulted in a move away from the strict rules of sacred Tibetan art, towards a reinterpretation of Tibetan Buddhist iconography, mythology and traditional stylistic features. These artists emerged at a time which converged with the beginning of globalisation and were in a position to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the intersection of socio-historical trajectories.

Both the artists in exile and the artists in Lhasa have also benefited from instruction in Western art technique and ideas which have clearly influenced their own art practices. Consequently, the contemporary Tibetan artists have created an entry into the Western (now global) art world, where works take on a different purpose from traditional religious visual culture, and this is reflected in the artist's altered treatment of traditional iconographic subjects and stylistic features.

In the contemporary art world, the gallery has replaced the house of worship. In the art gallery it is not the strict adherence to aesthetic and liturgical rules and systems of proportions that matters, but the exploration of concepts behind the works and the mastery of new techniques and materials. This allows a resolution of ideas and communication to a new audience which expects to fulfil their part of the artistic equation

by contemplating the levels of aesthetic and philosophical elements of the art work. In this new ‘anything goes’ artistic environment, we find that the contemporary Tibetan artists reinterpret iconography while retaining essential underlying philosophical ideas or otherwise use this iconography to make profound social comment. Ultimately, there are both exogenous and endogenous forces contributing to the contemporary Tibetan art movement. The result is the expression of a modern Tibetan identity that absorbs disparate influences and emits a new ‘creole’ visual language.

In terms of visual language, the artists in Lhasa frequently use motifs from the Cultural Revolution while in the West, these symbols are seldom employed by the Tibetan artists. However, it cannot be said that the Lhasan artists use these symbols because they are stuck in a time warp. Rather, they employ the symbols of the Cultural Revolution, with great dexterity and ingenuity, because the period is part of their cultural repository and modern identity, as expressed in the Gedun Chopel Artists’ Guild manifesto.

On the other hand, the artists of the diaspora make use of symbols, icons and images from their immediate Western environments or the global ecumene. For example, Tenzin Rigdol has used images of the New York subway map, the president of the United States and Aung San Suu Kyi. Gonkar Gyatso has used the figure of an indigenous Australian in his *Reclining Buddha* work.

While together the two branches of the contemporary Tibetan art movement form a coherent ensemble, different mirrored concerns can be ascertained. The artists in Lhasa are to a great extent concerned with the erosion of Tibetan culture in their homeland by foreign cultural and political forces. Amongst the diaspora, artists are concerned with negotiating their Tibetan identity within a wider foreign society. Both situations result in a double-consciousness comprising Tibetan culture and something else, and these two

parts of their identities run along parallel tracks through their lives. It is more than the coexistence of traditional and modern, but the double-consciousness of one who lives partly within and partly outside their common culture.

These contemporary artists treat and use the traditional iconography to both express traditional Tibetan Buddhist philosophical concepts in new ways for a modern audience, as well as metaphorical and allegorical devices to express current socio-political concerns.

Contemporary Tibetan art presents a more complex picture of a community, a society and a culture, than is often portrayed in movies, books or exhibitions of traditional art. The contemporary Tibetan art movement provides new cultural spaces for a re-negotiation of modern Tibetan identity in a globalised world, beyond the nostalgia for another time or place, or an invented idea of identity based on that nostalgia. The purview of the movement is indeed the renewal of Tibetan art and “an encounter with newness” which provides “the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood ... that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the ideas of society itself.”⁵⁷⁵

To conclude, this study has shown that the changed cultural contexts, which include exile, occupation and globalisation, within which the Tibetan artists now operate has impacted on the iconographic, mythological and stylistic features of Tibetan art. The artists treat and use the iconographic material of the Tibetan religious art traditions in order to interpret modern culture and current issues, in a way that is not iconoclastic but rather deconstructs and reconstructs these traditions to suit their modern sensibilities.

Accordingly, the contemporary Tibetan art provides space for re-negotiation of modern Tibetan identity. These artists challenge the stereotypes, myths and assumptions

⁵⁷⁵ Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 7.

regarding Tibetan culture and Tibetan identity and take their place in the modern world.

While their art expresses their historico-psychic trajectories, it does not hark on nostalgia but presents as part of the modern art phenomenon that records culture in transition.

Appendix A: Gedun Chophel Artists' Guild – Mission Statement

Usually groups are formed through someone's initiative. However, this particular Gedun Chophel Artists' Guild came together naturally through shared experiences and common interests. We were all born in the turbulent 60s and 70s. We lived through the rationing period of Chairman Mao, and remember his passing away. We also have experienced the radical modernizing changes brought about by Deng Xiaoping throughout China. Like other young people, we like to keep up with the times and trends, but we also respect and value the traditional aspects of our unique cultural heritage. Some of us were born here in Tibet, and some have come from other places. However, we always stick to drawing out originality and inspiration from the new multi-faceted Tibet, which is far beyond the image of many outsiders. Thus, with our shared ideas and vision, we have formed the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild in 2003, the very year of the centenary birth anniversary of 20th century Tibet's great leading intellectual and artists, Gedun Choephel, an inspiration whose spirit is living in us to this day. We do not wish to simply make a living from our art, but wish to contribute to the development of contemporary art. We want to faithfully show our innermost thoughts and feelings through art by whatever medium we choose to use.

(Gedun Choephel Artist's Guild, 2004)

Glossary

Note on language

For Tibetan words, I have used the Tibetan and Himalayan Library (THL) Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan throughout this thesis.

I have also employed the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) for words in the Sanskrit language.

Tibetan (T), Sanskrit (S).

ālidhāsana (S): standing posture, as in *yab-yum* figures.

arhat (S): worthy one, perfected person.

bhūmi (S): earth.

bhūmisparśa mudrā (S): earth-touching mudra.

bodhi (S): realization, enlightenment.

bodhisattva (S): one who aspires to enlightenment not only for themselves but for the benefit of others.

buddhapāda (S): Buddha's footprints.

cakra (or **chakra**) (S), **khor-lo** (T): wheel.

cakrasaṃvara tantra (S): The Discourse of Śrī Heruka.

cakravartin (S): universal monarch or ruler.

chang (T): Tibetan barley beer.

chatra (S): **dgugs** (T): parasol, umbrella.

chuba (T): long sheepskin coat.

ḍākinī (S): female spirit creature, sky-dancer.

devī (S): goddess.

dharma (S), (**chö**, T): universal law.

dharmacakra (S): wheel of law.

dorjé (T), **vajra** (S): diamond, lightning bolt.

drilbu (T): ritual bell.

jātaka (S): birth stories – stories about the previous lives of the Buddha.

kālacakra (or **kālachakra**) (S): Wheel of Time tantric system.

kang-ri (T): snow mountain.

kyang shing (T): traditional wooden stretcher frame for *thangka* painting.

karma (S): action, law of universal cause and effect.

katag (T): ceremonial scarf.

klu (T): spirits.

- kyang shing** (T): traditional wooden stretcher frame for *thangka* painting.
- lung ta** (T): wind horse.
- mahāpuruṣa** (S) - great man.
- mahāyāna** (S): great vehicle.
- makara** (S): mythological sea-monster.
- mālā** (S) **trengwa** (T): prayer beads.
- maṇḍala** (S) **kyinkhor** (T): circle, mystic diagram; **dul-tson kyinkhor**: sand maṇḍala.
- Mañjuśrī**: Bodhisattva of Wisdom.
- mantra** (S) **ngak** (T): sacred sonant formula.
- Māra** (S): demon of Buddhist mythology.
- matsya** (S): fish, one of the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism.
- māyā** (S): illusion.
- mudrā** (S): gesture, posture.
- Nāgārjuna**: Buddhist philosopher c.150 – c.250 CE, India.
- nāga** (S): sacred snake.
- nirvāṇa** (S) **myang-'das** (T): “blowing out”, beyond saṃsāra, liberation.
- oṃ** (S): seed mantra embracing the secrets of the universe.
- ösel** (T): clear light
- padma** (S) **pema** or **padma** (T): lotus.
- parinirvāṇa** (S): complete or final nirvāṇa.
- pecha** (T): sacred manuscript.
- phurpa** (T): ritual dagger.
- rig gnas** (T): branches of knowledge
- Śakti** (S): divine consort of Śiva, female principle.
- Śākyamuni** (S): the historical Buddha, prince of the Śākya clan.
- Śambhalaḥ** (S): mythical kingdom in Buddhist and Hindu traditions.
- saṃsāra** (S): “wandering”; process of birth, death and rebirth, world of suffering.
- sangkhang** (T): stove for incense offering.
- śilpa** (S): texts devoted to the explanation of arts and crafts.
- Śiva** (S): third god of the Hindu Trinity, the Destroyer.
- skandha** (S) **phung po lnga** (T): elements that constitute and explain mental and physical existence.
- so-byis** (T): long turquoise earring worn by lay officials.
- srin mo** (T): supine demoness of Tibet.

stūpa (S), **chöten** (T): shrine, reliquary.

śūnyatā (S): **tongpa nyi** (T): emptiness.

sūtra (S): scripture, collection of discourses of the Buddha.

svastika (S): auspicious symbol of luck and prosperity.

Śyāmatārā (S): Green Tārā.

tantra (S): esoteric Buddhist texts.

Tārā (S) **Dölma** (T): Buddhist female deity.

terma (T): revealed scripture (lit. hidden treasure).

theravāda (P): doctrine of the elders.

trinayāna (S): three eyes.

utpala (S) (T): lotus attribute of Green Tārā.

uṣṇīṣa (S): topknot.

vāhana (S): vehicle of a Buddhist or Hindu deity.

vajrāsana (S): seated meditation posture, as in the seated *yab-yum* figures.

vajrayāna (S): **dorjé-thepa** (T): diamond vehicle.

yab-yum (T): father-mother.

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(Note on Tibetan names: Traditionally Tibetans do not have family names but a combination of given names. I have, therefore, utilised the practice of listing the Tibetan names according to the first letter of the first name. In addition, Tibetans often have two different names, and it is not unusual for them to change their name in their lifetime.⁵⁷⁶ Where an artist or other Tibetan author uses two names I have inserted the alternative name in parentheses.)

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